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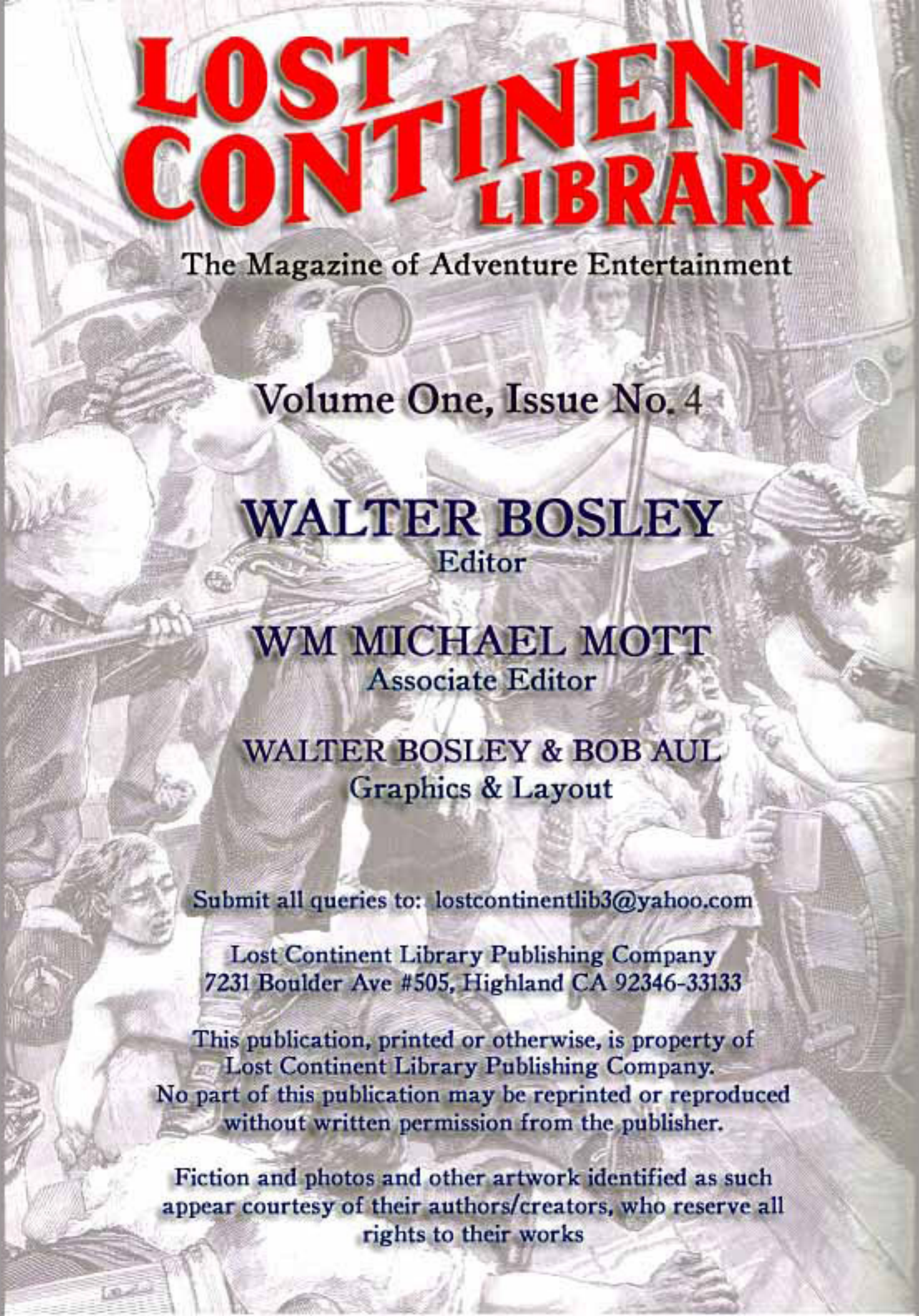
Where Adventure Lives Forever!

No. 4



Halliburton Humiliates The Matterhorn!

Bryn Colvin E. A. Guest Wm Michael Mott



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The Magazine of Adventure Entertainment

Volume One, Issue No. 4

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Chief's Log

Here we are with the fourth issue!

As we move along through Spring, there is much to be excited about. This is the year that Indiana Jones returns to the big screen. In a little less than two months from when I write this, the greatest adventure hero of our times will be cracking his whip and kicking ass once again! I've already started counting the days!

I truly enjoy putting together this magazine every month and sincerely appreciate the enthusiastic response. I have to admit it's a labor of love, but it's good to know that so many people are enjoying the magazine. Lately, we've heard from models wanting to be featured here, and we're in the process of photographing new LCL girls. This month, though, we decided to try something different with our pictorial. I am also very happy to have received a good and intelligent review on "Dial P For Pulp" -- Big Thanks for the good words there!

In this issue, we introduce you to the first adventure journalist of our modern era in a harrowing yet humorous account of a mountain ascent in the days before nylon and Gore-Tex. We also present the first report from an exciting new voice in the exploration of lost cities. Naturally, we have some great fiction for you die-hards, and the other fun features you've become addicted to.

I'm glad you came back!

Walter

FIELD CABLES

WRITE TO US AT: LCL MAG, 7231 BOULDER AVE #505, HIGHLAND, CA 92346-33133
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Cora Stanton of El Paso, Texas, writes:

"I really love your magazine. I never knew there were so many great old adventure movies and stories. I look forward every month to the new issue."

Steve Miller of Vista, California, writes:

"You guys are really doing a bang-up job with this magazine. Keep up the good work!"

Woody Dernberger of Yellow Springs, Ohio, writes:

"Out of this world! I'm hooked!"

Danuta Vasquez of Lima, Peru, writes:

"Your magazine is becoming popular down here. I love the stories and pictorials."

Vic Chase of Bellevue, Nebraska, writes:

"Love the mag. More retro horror, please!"

Heather Leach of Mason City, Iowa, writes:

"My little brother turned me onto you guys. I really like this stuff now! Rock on!"

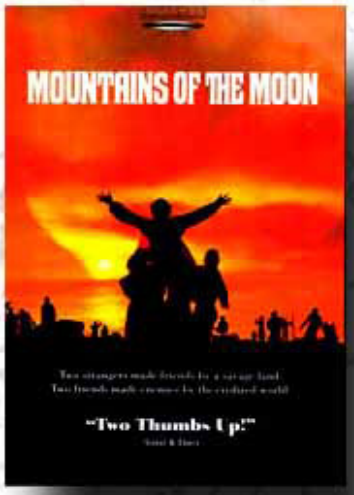
Charlton Heston



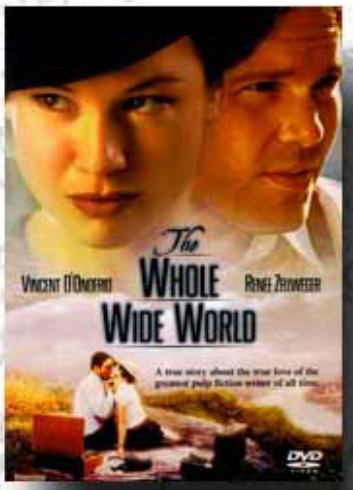
1923 - 2008

Photo courtesy of Fraser Heston

REVIEWS



Mountains of the Moon (1989)



The Whole Wide World (2003)

THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD (2003)

I selected this movie for review because it is rare that we get to see much about the people who have shaped the genre we enjoy so much. Robert E. Howard was one of those extraordinary people who do not spend much time with us, it seems, but who leave behind a collection of work that lasts well beyond our own lifetimes. It is often easy to be so engaged with an author's characters that we don't even consider the flesh and blood that actually lived and breathed, whose inner sentient struggle with existence ignited a creative fire. In the seventy-two years since Howard's tragic death, he has become an icon staring out at us from under a white fedora. Most of us are familiar with the basics of his life, but we really only know him through the morose resolve of Solomon Kane and the steely practicality of Conan. But Novalyne Price knew him, loved him and wrote about him. She lived beyond Howard, into our times. As most of us have known Howard through his works and as an image in a photograph many decades ago, Price moved along with us, no doubt experiencing his notoriety in a much different and more personal way. We can only know him through his stories and the accounts of others, but she lived those moments spent with a dear friend whom she loved very much. Howard was not just a printed name, to her. In this film, co-produced by its star Vincent D'Onofrio, we see the story we are familiar with brought to life in a small way to emphasize its reality. Howard is not shown as the writer who goes off to the big city that changes him. He is the same man he undoubtedly was before he ever sold his first story, and certainly would have been had he never sold a story. This film captures the human character of the man because it stays close to home, as Howard did, ironically. We see the moment he learned H.P. Lovecraft requested his address, but we don't see the correspondence that we know followed.We are made aware of Howard's reputation as a successful pulp writer through his diminutive notoriety in his town. But this movie isn't the usual sort in which we watch all the career moves of an artist. This film is more personal than that, thanks to Novalyne

Price having shared with us the man she knew. Convincingly portrayed by Renee Zellweger, we laugh at Price's initial reactions to and twitterpations over the clumsy grace of a big goofy guy possessed with boundless imagination. After Price says she can't see the giant snakes or naked damsels anywhere around the Texas plains, we believe when Howard tells her she isn't looking close enough, that they are. Just as you feel you've gotten to know this fascinating, earthy guy with an eye in the clouds, reality creeps in and his awkward fumblings with intimacy and bouts of frustrated depression drive his story to its well known tragic end. It is because of D'Onofrio's focused performance, driven by the producer's personal appreciation for Howard's writing that we even have this film to experience one of our many literary heroes. Howard didn't write about doctors, lawyers or spoiled idiot aristocrats. He was a man who saw the folly in dramatizing the superficial; a man whose spirit suffered, yet left behind a body of work with wings to soar. I remember when I stood at a sci-fi con and had a personal few minutes with Ray Bradbury twenty-some years ago, and how his writing came alive for me after my interaction with the man himself. This film did the same thing for me where Robert E. Howard is concerned. I recommend it very highly. It's not more than what it is, but that is enough. This one's required viewing.

Mountains of the Moon

I didn't leave much room for this review, but that doesn't reflect my opinion of this film. I love it! This was the film that really introduced me to the great Sir Richard Francis Burton in a way that captivated my imagination.

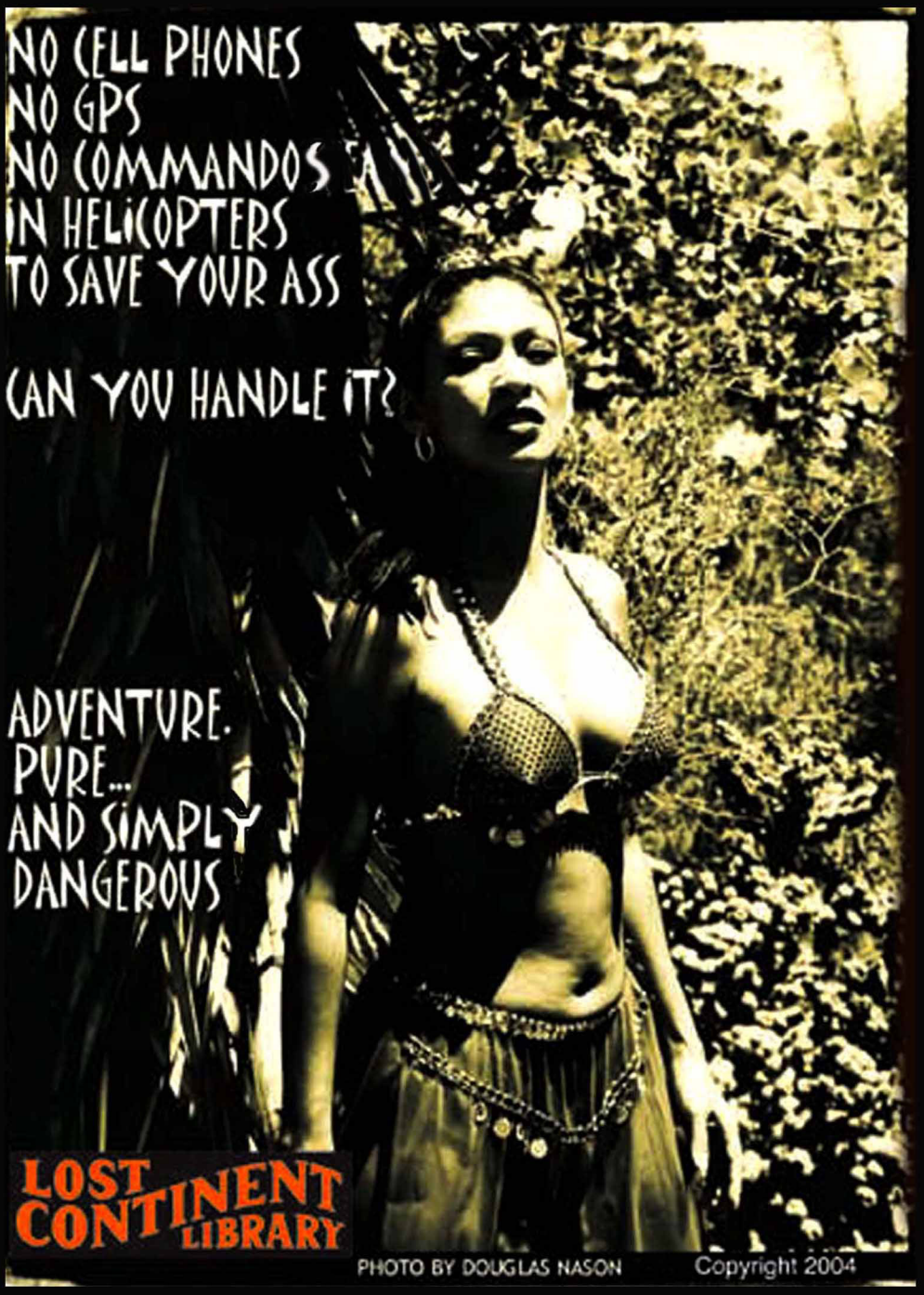
This is, without a doubt, my favorite Patrick Bergin film, and upon repeat viewings, after having read about the historical Burton, I sense Bergin has done a damned good job capturing his essence. Iain Glen as Speke is not to be dismissed by any means, for his tragic presence is well performed. Delroy Lindo is simply superb. This film is one of those that attempts to present a fair portrait of facts, and does a better job than most in that category. If you're unfamiliar with the discovery of the source of the Nile, then you're in for a treat. You get to see what exploration was really like, from how Burton got that terrible scar on his face to what happens when Speke gets a bug in his ear, and what things like malaria used to do to people before modern medical science developed. An element of this story that moves like a silken thread through its rugged fabric is the relationship between Burton and his wife Isabel, played by Fiona Shaw. If you've read 'A Rage to Live', then you'll enjoy this aspect even more. If I ever find a woman like Isabel Burton, I'll consider marrying again. In the end, we are left wondering about Speke's fate, but we have no doubt as to the character of Burton. I give this film a maximum rating.

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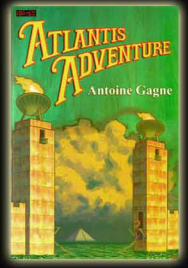
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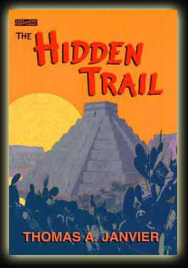
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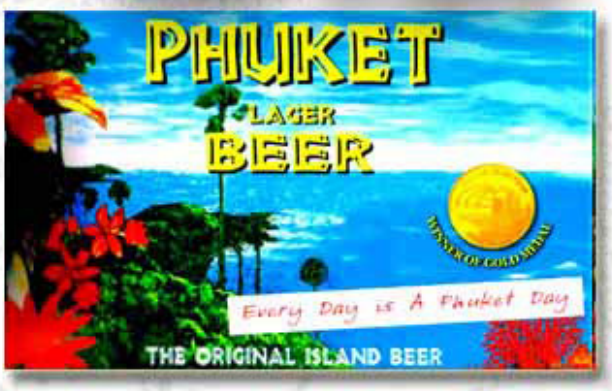






THAT'S RIGHT,
ONLY THESE THREE TITLES
YOU SEE HERE!

GROG 'N BREW



The theme here is adventure booze.

What does that mean? Each issue I will review a spirit featuring adventure themes or exotic lands where adventure can often be found. My only 'expertise' is drinking it. All the other analysis is bullshit. I don't really give a crap how many hops or crabapples are added in the brewing process. I basically rate them how I taste them. They get reviewed if their name, label and packaging are related to anything adventure.

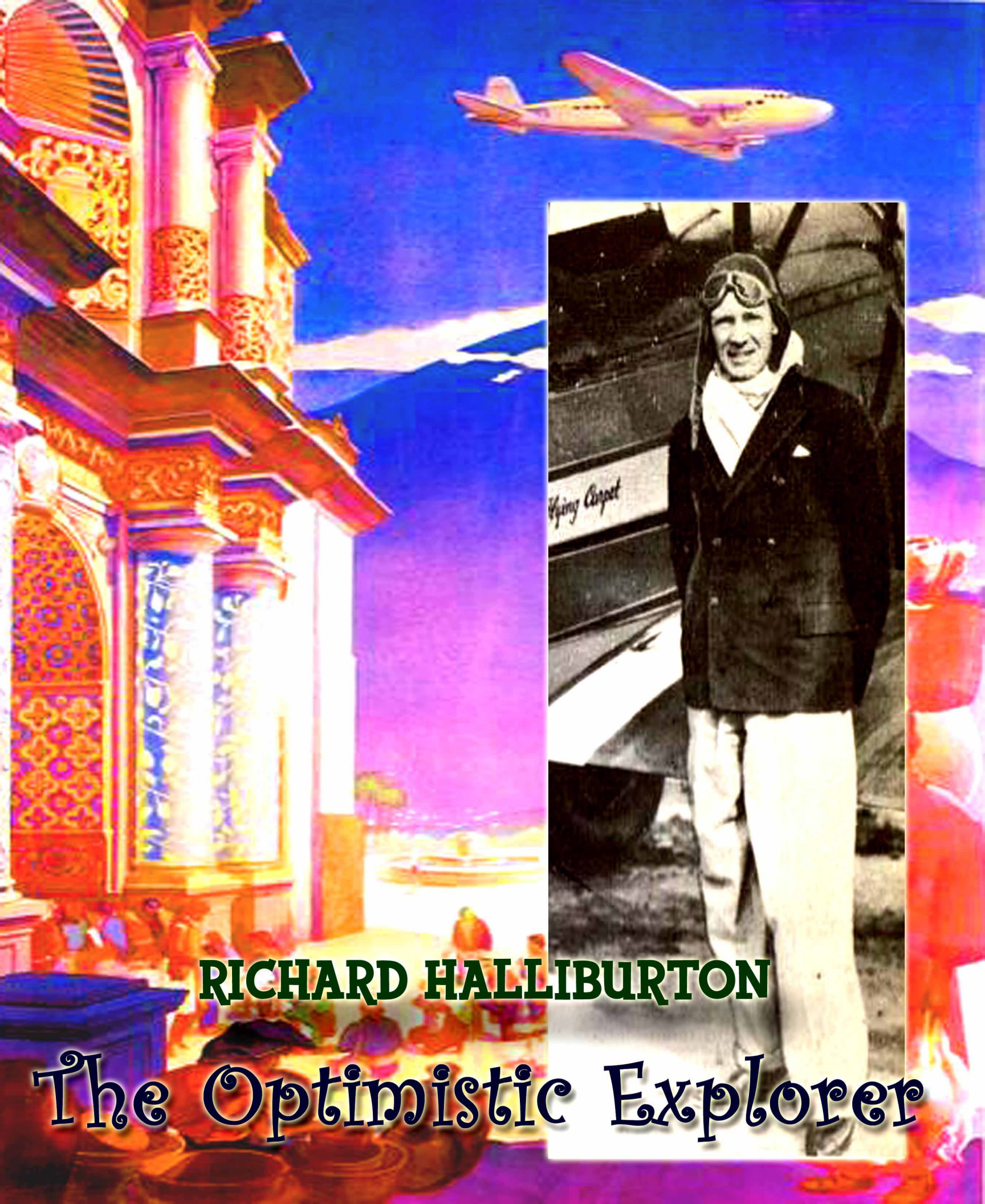
Why? There are some pretty damned good beers out there in adventurous places, and this is an adventure magazine. My travels have taken me to Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, South America, Southeast Asia, and Europe E&W. I was knocking back an obscure stout when a rocket blew up outside the Talibar not a hundred feet away, and I didn't skip a gulp. I've fended off some fine saloon girls, while enjoying ice cold Baltika 9 in Tashkent (I said some, not all...). Wherever I've gone, there's always been beer, even when it defied the Muttawa (which just makes it taste all the better).

I'm kicking off our new regular feature with a review of PHUKET Lager Beer from Thailand. I like this beer. It's a lager, so it's easy. I'm a stout lover, but on the first gulp, I was pleased. Smooth, but definitely present, unlike that typical major American label crap. And there's no after-taste to piss me off. PHUKET delivers. I drank it chilled in a frosty mug and it went down smooth as water, without tasting like water. It was thirst quenching, and the taste was slightly creamy, to me. The next night, I had another the same way, and the following night I had two. It passed the daylight test, as I had one with lunch today, and now I'm savoring the last bottle of the pack for the writing of this report to you, the readers.

Yes, this beer has won a gold medal, for you panty-waists who chitter about that sort of sissy nonsense. But medals had not a damned thing to do with why I bought it. The price was right: $5.99 at Trader Joe's.

Looking for a beer that simply tastes good? Go to Trader Joe's and just say 'PHUKET'.

-- Monty Greylock


RICHARD HALLIBURTON
The Optimistic Explorer

Born on 9 January 1900 in Tennessee, Richard Halliburton was an adventure traveler and author who represented the spirit of the last great era of exploration of the world. Whereas most modern travel writers have little more to convey than details of lodging amenities and well-known tourist sites, Halliburton wrote of ancient ruins and exotic far corners, often risking his life in dangerous situations, yet always seemingly with a smile. He was known as the 'optimist explorer' and for good reason, as you will read in the following article written by the man himself. However, it may be of interest to learn about the man before continuing on to his account of his first climb up the legendary Matterhorn.

Halliburton dropped out of college in 1919, and worked passage across the Atlantic, then commenced a walking tour through England and France, after which he decided to return to graduate from Princeton. But he was smitten with travel and rejected the conventional life. Spontaneous adventure suited him more, so Halliburton chose to earn his living from writing about his travels. He dedicated his first book to his Princeton roommates, "whose sanity, consistency and respectability drove [him] to this book".

Although not the exemplary physical specimen, one of Halliburton's adventures was to swim the length of the Panama Canal. Only ships were allowed to navigate the Canal, so he registered as the *S.S. Halliburton*, and his 36-cent toll was the lowest in history, based on his weight and length.



While at Princeton, Halliburton sold an article to *Field & Stream Magazine* for $150, which only encouraged him to lead a so-called 'unpractical life' of travel and paid correspondence. Upon returning from remote countries, he could not sell his first manuscript so he got himself on a lecture tour. That did the trick and Halliburton was then able to sell *The Royal Road to Romance*, from which the following article appears. Halliburton's enthusiasm and vivid narrative made one of the most successful lecturers of his time. Halliburton's style and success inspired what became adventure journalism.

In 1931 Halliburton hired a pilot to fly him around the world in an open cockpit biplane and embarked on "one of the most fantastic, extended

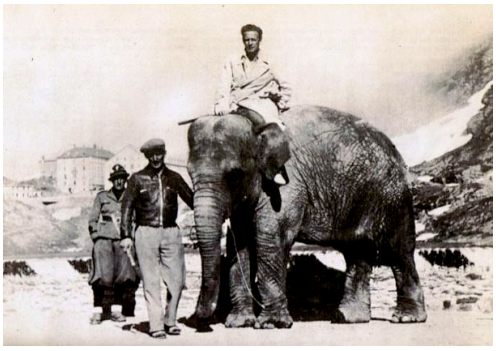
air journeys ever recorded" taking 18 months to circumnavigate the globe, covering 33,660 miles, and visiting 34 countries. The journey took Halliburton from Los Angeles to New York, to England, France and Spain, to Gibraltar and Morocco and across the Atlas Mountains.



The Flying Carpet and its crew.

The journey continued across the Sahara and Halliburton spent several weeks in the French Foreign Legion in Algeria before heading on to Cairo and then Petra. After crossing the Middle East, Halliburton and his pilot continued on into Asia, where Halliburton visited the Taj Mahal and went on to capture the first aerial photograph of Mount Everest, the pilot performing aerial acrobatics for the Maharajah of Nepal while there – not realizing Halliburton's safety belt was unbuckled at the time! One tribal chief even paid them several shrunken heads for a ride. After becoming the first Americans to fly to the Philippines, Halliburton and his pilot returned to the States via San Francisco and back to LA.

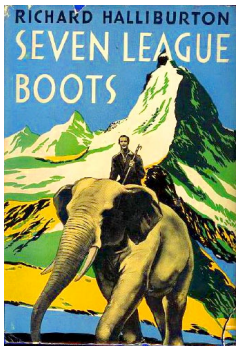
Halliburton authored and lectured and represented what could be experienced simply through sheer desire. His book, *The Complete Book of Marvels*, was a popular volume

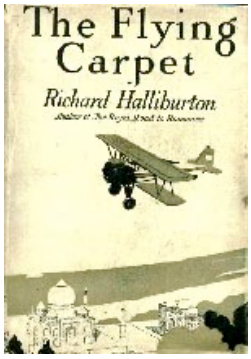


of excursions throughout the ancient and modern cities of the world and their wonders. From the Grand Canyon to Niagara Falls and New York City, from the Yucatan and Chichen Itza, from the Alps to Greece to Russia, Halliburton takes the reader around the world with him, to the Great Pyramids and the mysteries and awe of India and Tibet. He rides elephants, camels and airplanes, all in the same book. I personally own a 1954 edition. Wherever Halliburton went, he brought back an entertaining, humorously stirring narrative for the readers and dreamers at home.

In early March 1939, Halliburton set out on a new adventure. With four other brave souls, he set sail on the *Sea Dragon,* a junk built for this crossing which embarked from Hong Kong. Their

destination was San Francisco and the Golden Gate International Exposition. Halfway across the Pacific Ocean, a typhoon struck. The junk was last sighted battling mountainous seas, over 3,000 nautical miles west of Midway Island. The ship that had made the sighting received the message: "Having a wonderful time. Wish you were here instead of me." The next message, reporting position and that 'all was well', was the last message anyone heard from the junk. After an exhaustive effort by the US Navy, the search was called off. In 1945, some wreckage identified as a rudder and believed to belong to the *Sea Dragon* washed ashore in California. Missing at sea since March, Halliburton was declared officially dead in October of 1939.





His books, which have been re-issued since 2000, continue to be of interest for their romantic accounts of his wide-ranging escapades. Among his feats and antics: the first documented winter ascent of Mount Fuji, riding an elephant over the Alps in imitation of Hannibal, being arrested for taking photos of the guns at Gibraltar, attempting to enter Mecca, which is forbidden to non-Muslims; hiding in the Taj Mahal in order to experience the sunset in solitude and swim in a pool by moonlight. Due to his reputation, Halliburton met the last emperor of China, and dined with Haile Selassie. Truly, this was a man who knew how to live.

For anyone who appreciates classic adventure, Richard Halliburton's life on the road continues to exemplify the spirit of what drives men and women to see what can be found beyond the horizon.

With special thanks to **Traveler's Tales**, the publishing company in San Francisco with the best catalogue of travel journalism in the world, we present to you a reprint of Halliburton's account of his first climb up the Matterhorn, from their 2000 edition of *The Royal Road to Romance*.

Lace up those hiking boots and climb a mountain with Richard Halliburton!

-- Walter Bosley

Sources:

Wikipedia

The Royal Road to Romance
-- Richard Halliburton

II.

Humiliating the Matterhorn

HAMBURG was by no means a prearranged destination. Our adventures would have begun at Lisbon or Manila had the Ipswich happened to dock at these places. The point of embarkation upon our road to Romance was entirely unimportant. We had hoisted our sails to catch whatever winds might blow, and the winds from the west had blown us into Germany.

After squandering seven of the fifteen dollars earned at sea (part of the expenditure being for "Otto" and "Ophelia," twin bicycles on which we planned to explore Europe), we decided we had spent enough money in Hamburg and that it would not be fair to the rest of the Continent unless we scattered it impartially.

Irvine wanted to ride straight to Paris; my mind was set on Rome. In order to avoid a conflict we agreed to gamble on our next destination. Irvine closed his eyes and revolving three times before a map of Europe, struck it blindly with his index finger. On opening his eyes he found he had half covered Rotterdam—and Rotterdam it was!

Burdened with only our two-pound knapsacks, we rode first to Berlin, and then turning west rolled along so leisurely from village to village that it took us fifteen days to reach the gate with "Deutschland" painted on one side and "Nederland" on the other. Satisfied we were not escaping convicts, the officials allowed us to pass, and to pedal through Amsterdam, The Hague and so on into Rotterdam.

And now whither? Once more we disinterred our map and cast about for a new destination. Half furtively, half intuitively, my own eyes slipped south to Switzerland, and to the moun-

tain on the Italian border marked in tiny letters: "Matterhorn." Here my heart lay, had lain ever since a picture of the regal peak had been hung in my school-boy study at Lawrenceville to dominate and stimulate every one who entered the room. Even now I had only to close my eyes and its glittering, beckoning pinnacle floated before me like the vision of swords and angels before Joan of Arc. Its majesty, its imperious sweep into the blue heavens, its romance and tragedies, fired my imagination anew until any possible substitute expedition became drab and insipid. A consuming desire rose within me to plant my foot upon this most notoriously murderous mountain in Europe. What if it had killed more people than any other? All the more reason to climb. Youth! Youth! Here was a magnificent chance to realize it. Here was a new and rare sensation worth almost any price—something beautiful, joyous and romantic all in one. We must attack the dragon now while we were responsive enough to sense its challenge. True we had no equipment and could not afford such luxuries, but neither had Moses equipment when he climbed Mount Sinai, and neither had Noah when he descended Ararat from the Ark. However if the adventure was to be considered seriously Irvine must be won over, and imbued with my own Matterhorn madness.

Before I could decide on the most strategic method of attack he spoke to me:

"Dick, I'd like to make a suggestion. I suppose it's out of the question though—too expensive—too dangerous—and all that, but it's something I've wanted to do ever since you hung that picture in our room. It's to—well—climb the Matterhorn."

To the astonishment of every one in the hotel lobby, not excepting Irvine, I gave him a furious hug accompanied by three wild cheers.

It was by now the twentieth of September, and we knew that the Matterhorn climbing season would be very shortly closed, if indeed it had not been already. There was no time to lose. "Otto" and "Ophelia" were sold, and on the proceeds we got to Cologne, turning without delay up the Rhine. Our race

against inclement weather in the Alps left us little time to enjoy the river journey, but even then, in an effort to get into training for the Matterhorn assault we tarried a few days along the way to climb the towers of Cologne and Strassburg cathedrals, the soaring fortress of Ehrenbreitstein overlooking Coblenz, the famous Lorelei cliffs, the steep paths that led to half a dozen crag-topping Rhineland castles and, as a final exercise, a number of pine-clad mountains in the Alsatian Vosges through which range we tramped during a hundred-mile ramble from Strassburg to the Swiss border.

And so, when we finally arrived at Zermatt, the village at the base of our mountain, we were prepared for the great conquest, at least to the extent of blistered heels and excruciatingly painful muscles. But neither Irvine nor I was in the least disheartened. Guides were found and negotiations begun.

"Of course you have climbed other mountains," said Adolph, one of the prospective pilots, who spoke excellent English.

We did not dare tell him that a flight of steps was our only recommendation to the Alpine Club, for it was two weeks past the end of the season, and we were afraid he would not take us.

"Oh, many," we admitted modestly, and enumerated vanquished pinnacles all the way from the Palisades to Popocatepetl.

While they had never heard of the Palisades, this sounded very difficult, and being duly impressed they agreed to make the ascent as soon as the fog and snow-storms on the heights above permitted. They despaired of us, however, when they learned that our equipment consisted of one toothbrush (each) and a safety-razor.

"But you must have cleated mountain shoes, and socks, and leggins, and mittens, and a wool helmet, and an ice-ax, etc., etc., etc. You are not climbing the Mount of Olives, you know. It will be bitter cold, and, since you have come out of season, a struggle all the way."

Irvine and I looked at each other in utter dejection. If we had to buy all these articles we would have nothing left with which to pay the guides. When we explained our predicament they responded with immediate sympathy, and outfitted us de luxe from their own equipment.

All this time because of continued fog, we had not enjoyed even the faintest glimpse of our spectacular mountain, but during the fourth night a storm broke upon the valley, and torrential rain cleared the atmosphere. On waking next morning we rushed to our window, and there aflame in the early sunshine, scorning the earth and holding itself haughtily aloof from other Alps, soared in dazzling whiteness—the Matterhorn.

At noon, with the air like wine, and the sky cloudless, Adolph and André took courage and, laden with ropes, food and equipment, led Irvine and me up the valley from Zermatt into the paws of the crouching tiger, which the Matterhorn greatly resembles when seen from a certain position.

Right away our guides began to tell us of the mountain's evil reputation and to relate harrowing stories of its numerous victims. With more conscientiousness than tact they took us to the roadside cemetery and pointed out a number of graves of interest to prospective climbers. Standing before them we read in thoughtful silence:

"C. H. and R. H.—Perished on the Matterhorn, 1865."

"W. K. W.—Fell to his death from the Matterhorn, 1870."

"B. R. B.—With two guides on June 10th, 1891, slipped from the shoulder of the Matterhorn and fell 3,000 feet."

The near-by museum was equally encouraging. It contained the ice-axes and clothes of the immortal young English climbers, Hudson, Hadow and Lord Douglas, who along with a Mr. Whymper and three guides came to Zermatt in 1865 looking for new crags to conquer. The Swiss had always considered the Matterhorn absolutely unscalable and informed the sportsmen of the fact.

In our own climb we marveled a dozen times that they, as the first party, ever gained the summit. But the Matterhorn revenged herself for the humiliation of being at last conquered by man. On the descent, just below the "shoulder," where there is a steep snow-bank up which one is now helped by a secured chain, Mr. Hadow, a Cambridge undergraduate and the youngest member of the party, slipped on the ice, and as all seven were roped together, dragged one member after another into the abyss, until only Whymper and two of the guides were left. They threw their weight in desperation against the drag of

their falling companions; and the rush was checked with the men dangling four thousand feet above the glacier. For a moment the rope remained taut, then, unable to bear the strain, it broke, and let four of the seven daring vanquishers of this haughty mountain fall to a tragic death.

It was with our thoughts on the graves and the story of the Whymper party that Irvine and I began the ascent.

After following the zigzag path for several hours we halted at the top of a promontory, and looked back down the canyon that leads to the Rhone and civilization. We could not stop long, for we had twenty-five hundred feet more of steep and, on that day, ice-covered trail to ascend before we reached the Hut, our destination for the first afternoon. Another two hours of steady climbing brought us breathless to this shelter, which overlooked the sea of glaciers stretching like fingers in five directions from the summit of Monte Rosa, glistening in the sunset, to the winding narrowing wrist, two thousand feet below, from which an icy torrent roared on down the valley. The gigantic semicircle of snow-sparkling crags loomed about us, with the mile-high precipice of the overhanging Matterhorn glowering and towering above, tossing its head defiantly into the face of the waning sun, where it became a brand of fire reflecting glowing rays of light that formed a fitting diadem for the autocrat of the Alps. The storm of the night before had covered the entire amphitheater with a glittering canopy which, intensified by a cloudless sky, made one's eyes ache from its unbroken whiteness.

A stove and bunks awaited us inside the shelter. About three hours after midnight we were up again, in order to complete as much of the climb as possible before the sun rose to melt the ice and make it treacherous. Roped, each man to a guide, we braved the freezing air and bumped our heads against the planets. The Milky Way, sweeping overhead, challenged in brilliance the last effort of the early October moon, which shone into the clear blue night, contorting the surrounding crags and illuminating the sphinx-like Matterhorn as it soared in majesty among the stars.

Feeling very much like a pet poodle being led by a chain, I barked in response to Adolph's call, and Irvine in response to André's. The first hour, our ropes dangled uselessly between us, as we were both fresh, and, by using our arms to lift ourselves from rock to rock, managed with average agility to follow at the heels of our guides. The narrow ridge pointing "this way" in the photograph was the general course of the

climb all the way up. At a distance the edge looks sharp; nor does proximity disillusion one, for even on the lower slopes one must crawl up and down saw-teeth not more than twenty inches in width, with not less than three thousand feet to fall in case one did. For a stretch of one thousand feet or more we had to leave the ridge and climb up the sheer rock-face. Here ascent was especially hard. The snow and ice had filled every hollow, making it necessary for Adolph to pick them free with his ax before we could find a footing. The almost perpendicular cliffs, from six to fifteen feet in height, began to grow higher and come oftener as we labored upward, so that we had to use elbows and knees and teeth and toes as well as hands and feet to gain every yard.

The guides would see that we were safely ensconced in some crevice, whereupon they would scale the rock wall to a point twenty or thirty feet above. Then, giving us the signal to start climbing, they would begin to draw on the ropes attached to our shoulders, and with the aid of this tugging from above we were able to raise ourselves from crack to crack with a very satisfactory sense of security.

In surmounting a particularly difficult cliff, a large stone which I had seized as a support became loosened from its bed as I pulled on it. With nothing else to hold to I immediately lost my footing, and in an avalanche of snow and rocks began to glissade down the nicheless, ice-covered right wall of the Matterhorn.

"Adolph! Adolph!" I cried in desperation.

Immediately the rope tightened and I was stopped with a jerk, before I had fallen eight feet, to swing in the breeze like a sack of cement, until, mainly by the effort of the guide, I was dragged over the difficulty. From then on to the "hang-over" the rope never slacked its tautness.

Our pilots soon saw we were not the chamois-goats we had pretended to be in Zermatt, as we dropped on a ledge, blind from altitude, trembling with weariness and wondering which glacier below we were going to fall on.

And our difficulties had only begun. The passage of the ice-bound shoulder, conspicuous in a photograph, instituted a new reign of terror. The wind blew with increasing violence as

we crossed the thirteen thousand-foot line and struck with enough force to blow us off the edge had we not clung like glue to the rock-face.

Beginning at the shoulder, ropes attached at the upper end to embedded iron spikes dangled downward, and only by pulling one's self hand over hand up these ice-covered cables was the ascent possible. However, even with these indispensable aids, the last six hundred feet was not a pleasure in which I would care to indulge each morning before breakfast. The rarified air made exertion exceedingly exhausting; the wind, whipping swirls of snow into our faces, stung like needles. Our arms ached from rope climbing and our hearts, unused to such a prolonged strain, palpitated in our chests.

The notorious "hang-over," half-way between the shoulder and the summit, where the top of the cliff protrudes over the bottom, found me almost spent, and only pride and the biting wind drove me on. I made one great effort to draw myself up the twenty-five feet of free-hanging cable, but half-way was my maximum. The wind caught me as I clutched the rope, blew me like a pendulum away from the cliff wall and over the sheer five thousand foot precipice. My eyes went blind; my arms ceased to exist; my head swam in half-consciousness. Once more Adolph had to come to the rescue. Having surmounted the "hang-over" with a score of parties as inexperienced as ourselves, he anticipated my predicament and heaving away at the attached line dragged me more dead than alive to his own level. Once Irvine was safe over the ledge we stretched our breathless lengths in the snow until we were refreshed. Then only did we notice that it was broad daylight, and realize that in the intensity of our assault we had forgotten to observe what must have been one of the world's most sublime pictures—sunrise from the Matterhorn.

The last hundred feet were like a stepladder, rough-surfaced and deep in snow into which we sank above our ankles at each step. Struggling doggedly on, looking nowhere but straight ahead, I noticed Adolph suddenly extend his hand to me.

"We're here," he said. "I congratulate you."

Indeed, we were on top—fourteen thousand, seven hundred and eighty feet, with all of Switzerland stretched out before us. In the cloudless air we could see nearly every mountain in the Alps. Mount Blanc loomed large and white to the

west, and the Jungfrau, perpetually snow-blanketed, could be seen to the north. Italy with her lakes and haze faded into the south, and the Monte Rosa group, rising even above our soaring ridge, dominated the east. Crouching on the supreme ledge of snow we ate our breakfast, with the wind trying to tear us to pieces for presuming to enter her private domain. Savage as they were, we forgot the aroused elements in our exultation over the humiliation of the Matterhorn. In that fierce moment of intense living we felt our blood surge within us. The terrors and struggles of the climb were forgotten. The abyss beneath us, the bewildering panorama about us, cast a spell that awed me to silence. I began to believe it awed Irvine too, for I saw him clasp his hands and look out over the six thousand foot chasm with an expression that assured me he was in tune with the Infinite.

"Oh, Dick," he whispered in such unusually solemn tones that I awaited some great inspired utterance about the sublimity of nature and the glory of God.

Breathlessly, tremblingly, I listened.

"*At last,*" he continued in a far-away voice, "after talking about it and dreaming about it all these years, at last, I can *actually* SPIT A MILE!"

Only the guides restrained me from pushing him off.

No sooner had I recovered from this blow than he began to lament the fact that he had forgot to bring along his ten-pound iron dumb-bell exerciser that he had lugged all the way from Berlin and so would miss his regular morning calisthenics. I suggested curtly that he go back and fetch it.

He was equally disgusted with me when I, clinging to the wooden cross that marks the Swiss-Italian border and scrouging into the snow to keep from being blown away, got out my inseparable note-book, and with frozen fingers laboriously inscribed a thought or two on the wind-whipped page.

"If you fell from here to Zermatt," he snapped impatiently, "you'd write scenic impressions in that confounded note-book on the way down."

As I looked over the edge and saw how far such a fall would be I concluded one might write quite a lengthy document before contact with the earth jolted the pencil out of one's hand.

"That would be one way of getting my literary efforts read, Irvine, judging from the collection of fallen objects in the museum. If you want your old clothes or note-books immortalized and preserved under glass to awe future generations, just jump off the Matterhorn."

The summit of this incorrigible mountain is commonly thought to be known only to a very favored few. This is a mistaken idea, for each season a number of parties beard the old lion and return to earth content and proud, with a vow, however, of "never again." There is not a mountain left in all Switzerland that has not been scaled, so that the joy of being the first to stand upon some formidable peak which only the eagles knew before, has passed forever. But there is almost as much joy in being the tenth or the hundredth. Familiarity can never breed contempt for such vast and beautiful peaks and valleys as these. The rivers bound over the rocks with just the same abandon now as a thousand years ago. The wine-like air from the snow and pines is not less exhilarating. The charm of the Alps will never die; for where else may one find nature as spectacular, yet as serene, as in these, her favorite mountains?

It is charm below the snow-line; it is fierce joy above, fierce joy to stand at dawn on the supremacy of some soaring crag and see the amber clearness of the jagged eastern horizon grow in intensity, to scale such peaks as the Matterhorn, surrounded by a sea of mountains, with nothing to indicate that you are in the heart of civilized Europe rather than some Greenland waste. One finds a stimulation here unknown elsewhere—a feeling of having attained unto another, higher life, unto another world, a world made not of land and sea, but of crystal air, and sky, and snow, and space. It all sent a surge through our hearts. It had been a new sensation of awful power, a new element conquered, a supreme response to the hunger for exhilaration, for motion and danger and intensity of sensation. We had achieved one of the great ambitions of our young lives. We would never be haunted now by the memory of this exquisite temptation to which we had not had the courage to yield. In future years our limbs would fail, our hearts and lungs decay. But it would not matter. There would be no vain regrets. We had realized our youth while we had it. We had climbed the Matterhorn!

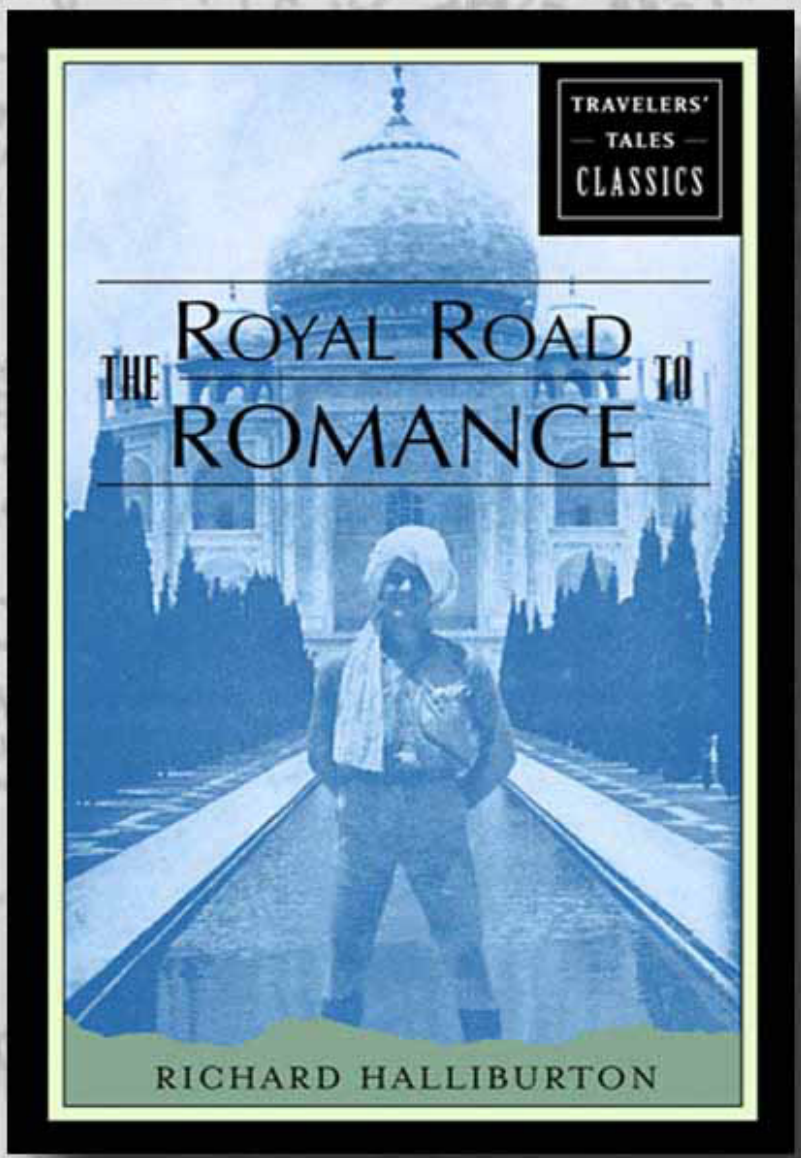
Ten o'clock was approaching before we could drag ourselves away from this Alpine throne and begin the precipitous homeward journey. We wondered on coming to several of the steepest and most nicheless cliffs how we would ever get down them, and once down, it was beyond our comprehension how we ever got up. The guides followed now, lowering us from rock to rock by a slow and steady extension of rope. I shall refrain from giving the details of our descent. The complete disappearance of the seats of our corduroy pants tells eloquently enough how we really came home to Zermatt.

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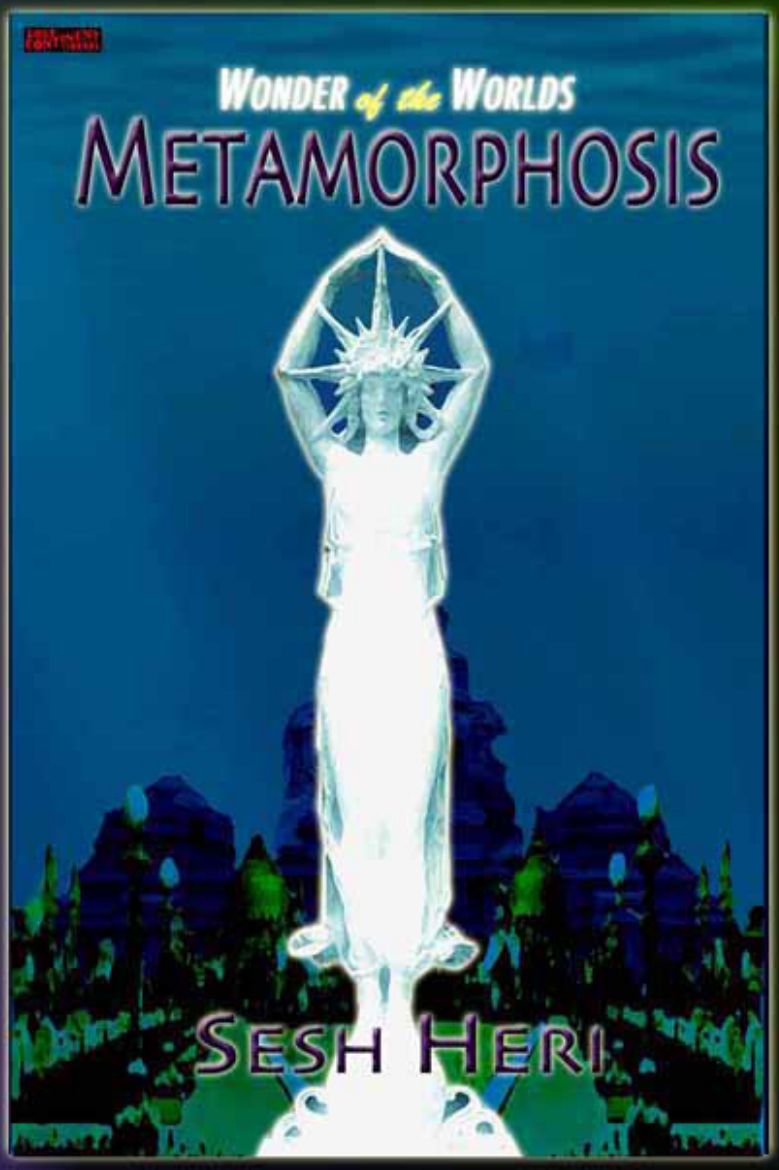
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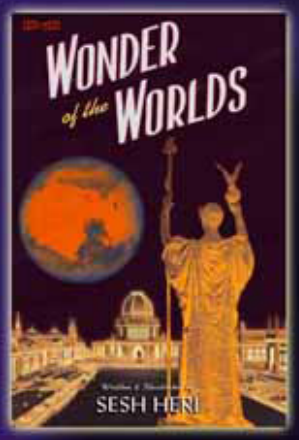


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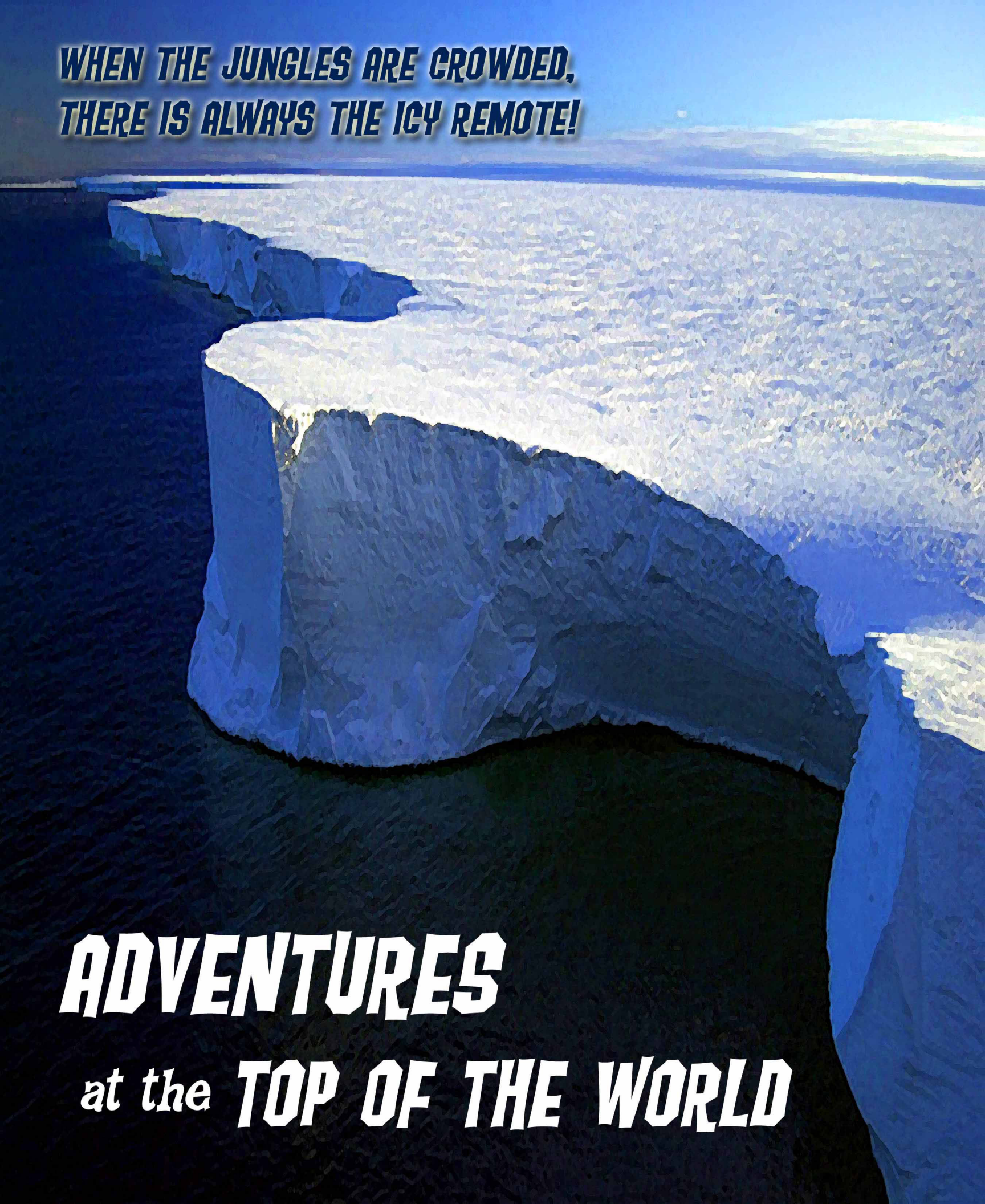
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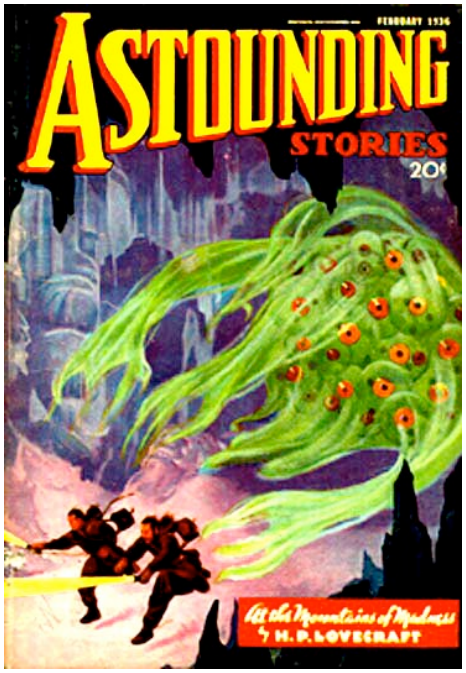
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ADVENTURES
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journals from that era. It seems Poe was especially interested in the explorations of Jeremiah Reynolds, and John Cleve Symmes, who believed in a hollow earth and once convinced the United States Congress to fund an expedition that would search for the entrance to the interior somewhere in the Arctic. The book was first published in England, where interest in the Franklin expedition to the Arctic was strong (Dan Simmons' *The Terror* is an excellent novel on this expedition). It is rumored that Poe, who died under mysterious circumstances, muttered as his final words, 'Reynolds, Reynolds', thus leaving an interesting open end for Hollow Earth die-hards to chew on.

The top of the world isn't the only place for cold adventures. Jules Verne placed his contribution at the bottom. *An Antarctic Mystery* also known as *The Sphinx of the Ice Fields*, is actually a sequel to *Pym*. It follows the adventures of the narrator and his journey to a very strange magnetic mountain.

Probably the most revered of the Antarctic adventures comes from H.P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*, first published in Astounding Stories in 1936. A geologist-professor from Miskatonic University warns of hitherto unknown and well-guarded secrets hoping to discourage a scientific expedition to Antarctica. On a previous expedition Dyer discovered



Somebody's gonna need clean underwear!

amazing and foreboding ruins there, and learned a dangerous secret that waits on the other side of a mountain range taller than the Himalayas. Strange figures are found in an ice cave, and mysterious deaths involve odd experiments. Ultimately, Dyer's expedition realizes they have found an immense city lost to the ages and elements, built by 'Elder Things' and he and his colleague are chased away by an undulating

There remain only two frontiers on the surface of our world, and both have hosted their share of great classic adventure movies and literature: the oceans and the polar regions.

The poles have long been a favorite of authors and filmmakers. The classic *Sinbad and The Eye of the Tiger* features a journey to the legendary land where a tropical climate thrives, protected behind a wall of ice, thanks mostly to ancient pyramid technology. In this film, Sinbad assists a beautiful princess who seeks to restore her baboon brother back to human form.



Sinbad and The Eye of the Tiger, Columbia , 1977

Naturally, the evil sorceress who transformed the brother follows their trail with her own dastardly son and a mechanical minotaur. Along the way, Sinbad enlists the aid of a legendary sorcerer who knows how to reach the hidden Hyperborean realm. This film features a journey to the arctic region, including a battle with a giant walrus, all in the great Dynamation style.

The mysterious arctic has long captivated the imaginations of explorers and dreamers alike. The frozen north in Greek mythology was 'Hyperborea' an unspecified nation in the northern lands beyond Scythia. It was a paradise where the sun shines all day. Similar to Hyperborea is Ultima Thule, where people lived to the age of one thousand and enjoyed lives of complete happiness.



She, RKO and Legend Films, 1935

A favorite of this magazine is Merian C. Cooper's *She* (1935), which takes the H Rider Haggard

story from Africa to a Hyperborean oasis ruled over by a legendary queen. The colorized version does the journey northward great justice, as the visuals were some of the best of their day and really stand out now. This film has

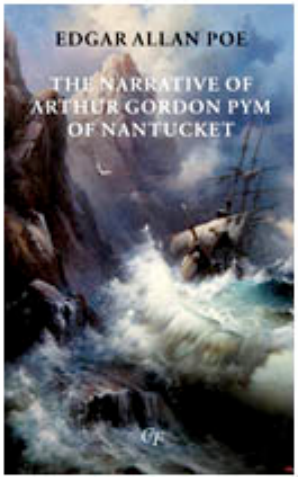


Nigel Bruce, Helen Mack and Randolph Scott are about to become a little too warm in *She* (1935)

the intrepid fur-clad explorers dog sledding it to the edge of known civilization where they hire a greedy codger to guide them to the highest edge of the world, beyond which they believe lays their legendary destination. Their small expedition crosses the arctic wastes farther north, until they reach the barrier – a massive wall of ice that stretches as far as the eye can see. Following the discovery of a man and a giant tiger encased centuries ago in ice, the greedy guide causes and avalanche that takes his life and leaves the explorers stranded. Luckily, the pass through the barrier is revealed by the avalanche, and they continue on their journey to the paradise beyond. You'll have to watch the movie to see what happens after that.

Before filmmakers ventured to the extremes of north or south, literary adventures took us there, inspired by the ancient legends and actual discoveries.

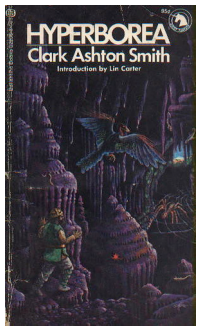
The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket by Edgar Allan Poe is the American master's only complete novel, published in 1838. This is the tale of a young stow-away aboard a whaling ship. The story starts out a conventional adventure at sea, but after a shipwreck, mutiny and cannibalism, it ventures into the strange and ends up in the Hollow Earth genre.



To convince the reader of the tale's authenticity, Poe used several travel

horror called a 'shoggoth', so terrifying that his colleague loses his sanity.

Lovecraft had a lifelong interest in Antarctica. In those times, Antarctica remained one of the vast unexplored regions of the world. Maps were enticingly blank in large areas of the frozen continent, inspiring Lovecraft's fertile imagination. Admiral Byrd's first expedition took place in 1928-1930, which Lovecraft mentioned repeatedly in personal letters, intrigued that Byrd may have found fossils indicating a tropical past. Lovecraft was also, like Verne, influenced by Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*.



A return north is no less bizarre with the contribution of Clark Ashton Smith's 'Hyperborean Cycle', a series of stories that take place in Hyperborea. As Smith and Lovecraft were contemporaries, they borrowed from each other, thus *The Hyperborean Cycle* is considered part of the *Cthulhu Mythos*. This collection mixes cosmic horror with a Howardesque sword 'n sorcery backdrop, featuring toad-gods and an advancing ice age that will destroy the ancient civilization.

On a more conventional note is the Disney film *Island at the Top of the World*, loosely based on the novel by Ian Cameron. The film is



Donald Sinden, Jaques Marin and David Hartman aboard the 'Hyperion'. Disney 1974.

set in the Victorian era. A wealthy society man hires a dirigible pilot to help find his son who has been lost in the Arctic. Enlisted in the effort is an expert on ancient Scandinavian cultures. Following disaster with the airship, the explorers find a lost civilization of Vikings who hold the son hostage. The man and his son (along with the son's new girlfriend) flee for their lives from a fanatic shaman's followers through a volcanic crater, leaving behind the colleague to study the culture.

The idea of a paradise at the poles as home to an ancient wise

and advanced civilization did not die in the 19th Century, nor did the idea become the sole possession of fiction and movies. In the years leading up to World War Two, German fascists who would go on to found the nefarious Nazi Party also believed in such polar legends.The name of the Thule Gesellschaft originated from mythical Ultima Thule, the Nordic equivalent of the vanished Atlantis. Hitler himself is alleged to have believed in a race of giant supermen living in Thule, possessing cosmic magical powers. They had psychic and technological energies exceeding the technology of the 20th century. The rumor is that the Nazis would enlist the aid of the



Researcher Joscelyn Godwin points out the ancient swastika in the Thule Society represented the spin of the Earth, centered at the North Pole.

supermen of Ultima Thule to save the Fatherland and create a new race of Nordic Aryan Atlanteans. This may be why the Nazis were so fascinated with Antarctica, believing it, possibly, to be the ice-covered continent of Atlantis. (In recent years, an interesting book on the idea has been written by Rand and Rose Flem-Ath, presenting compelling evidence that puts the idea squarely outside of Nazi ownership.)

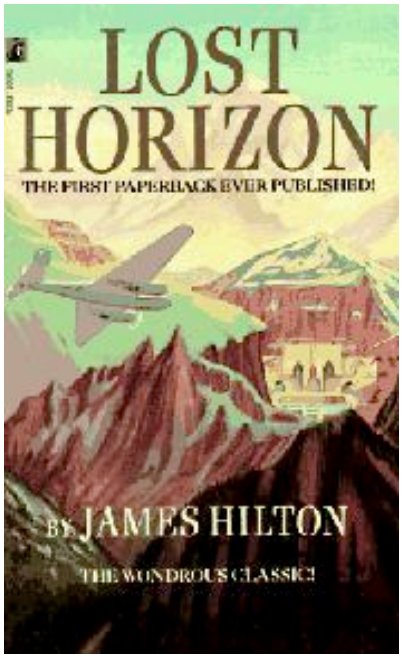
Perhaps one adventure movie featuring a character inspired by this arrogant Nazi notion is *Sky Captain and The World of Tomorrow*. The mad genius Totenkopf ultimately places his lair on an uncharted tropical island, but the process of re-creating the world in the image of



Sky Captain, Paramount, 2004

his ideal involves a factory way up in the Himalayas of Nepal. At one point in the film, Joe and Polly must journey there and are rescued by mysterious monks in Shangri-La. In a film full of references, this one should be well-known to classic adventure fans.

The concept of Shangri-La hidden in the even more remote icy peaks of the Himalayas is best known from *Lost Horizon*, the socio-political adventure novel by James Hilton and the films inspired



by it, in which an airplane carrying western refugees from a besieged Asian city crashes high in the mountains. Rescued by mysterious denizens of this seemingly desolate place, the refugees are taken to the temperate and beautiful Shangri-La, where they live in paradise and meet the centuries old high llama. I have personally always loved the ending in which the idealist weary of our world is last seen heading into the snowy Himalayas, hoping to find his way back to a place better than this world.



Ronald Colman knows a good thing when he sees it – but does he make it back to Shangri-La?

There are many polar adventures to be read, seen and even experienced. The icy wastelands and the frozen frontiers offer thrills and dangers for the armchair adventurer and the real-life explorer alike. The polar regions are likely the eeriest landscapes on Earth, and quite unforgiving.

You can still be part of one great adventure by teaming a dogsled across the Arctic in the annual Iditarod race, or you can find employment either as a scientist or support professional in an Antarctic station. There's a lot of adventure up – and down – there.

Dress warm!

-- *Monty Greylock*

Sources: Wikipedia

WE THOUGHT YOU'D ENJOY A FEW ADVENTURE BABES FROM YEARS GONE BY...



FAY WRAY IN "KING KONG" (1933)



DOLORES DEL RIO IN "BIRD OF PARADISE"



HELEN MACK, STAR OF "SHE" AND "SON OF KONG"

IRISH MCCALLA

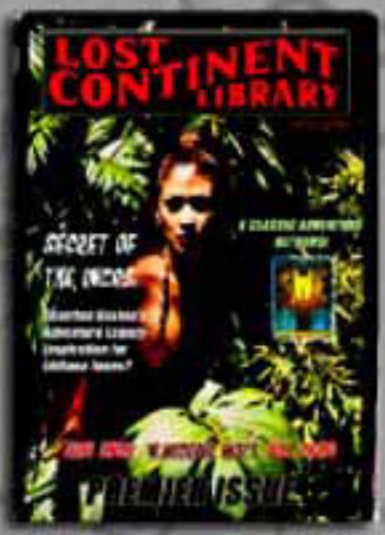
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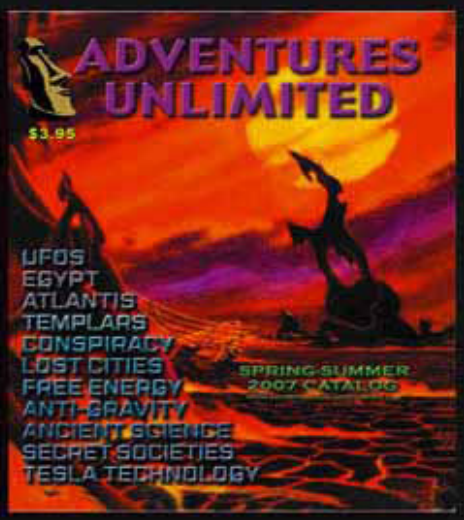
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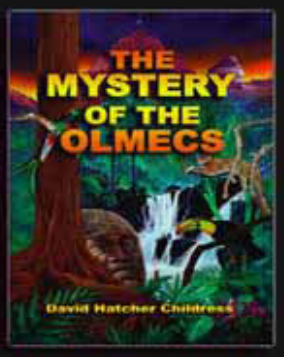
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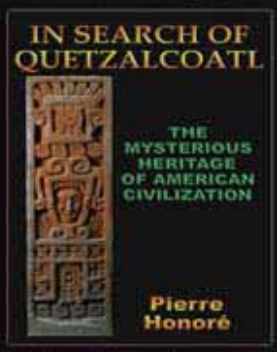
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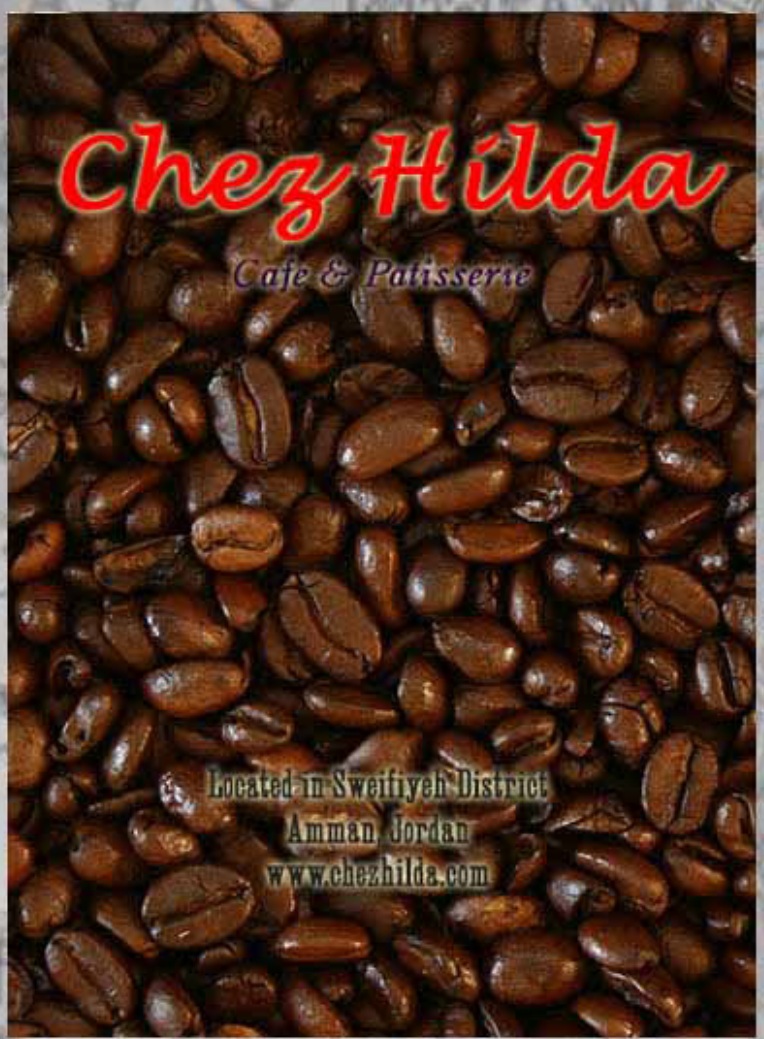
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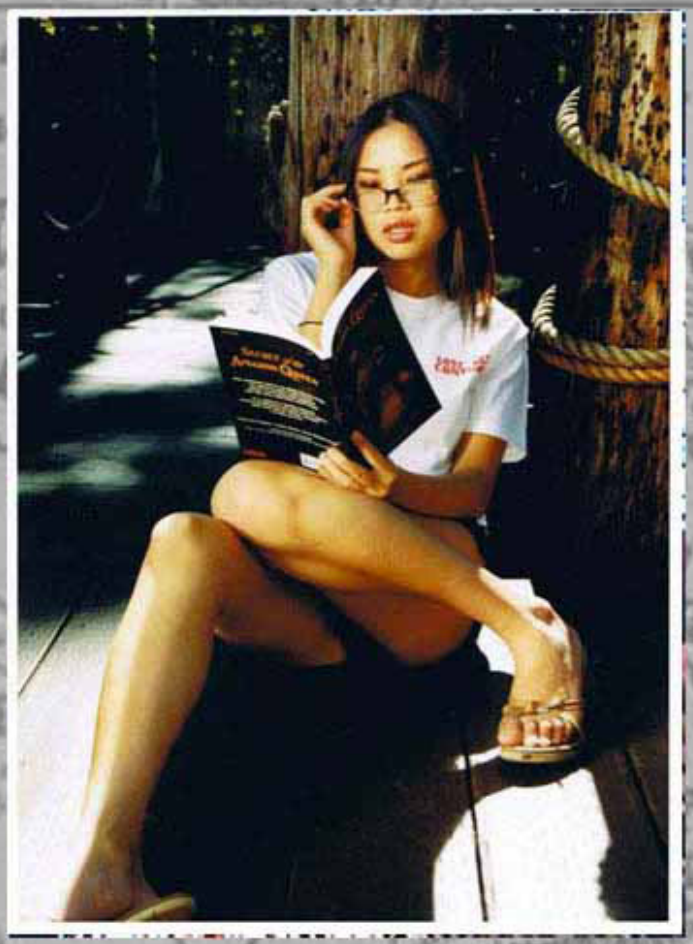
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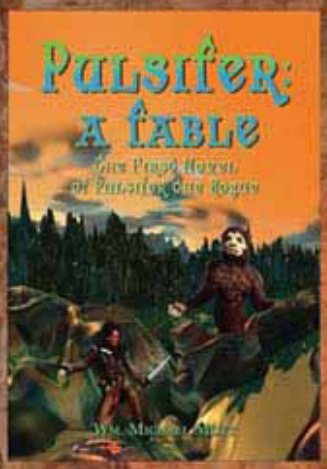
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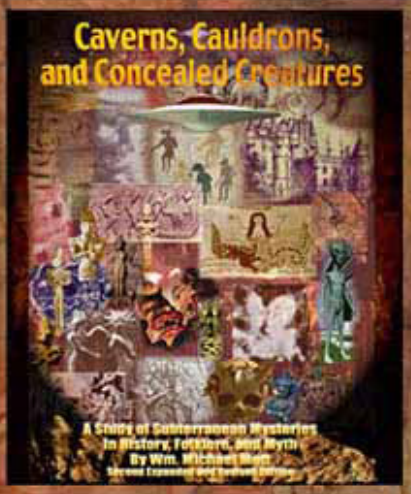
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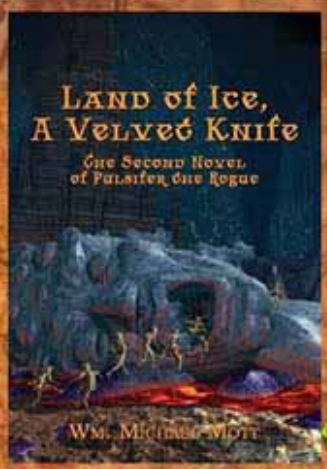
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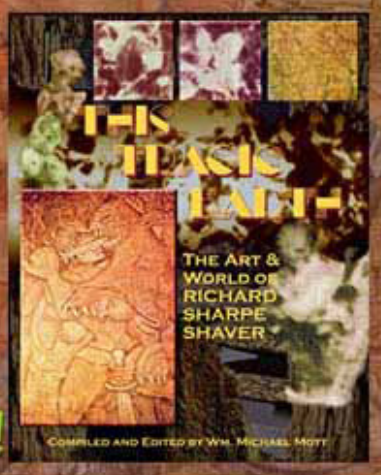
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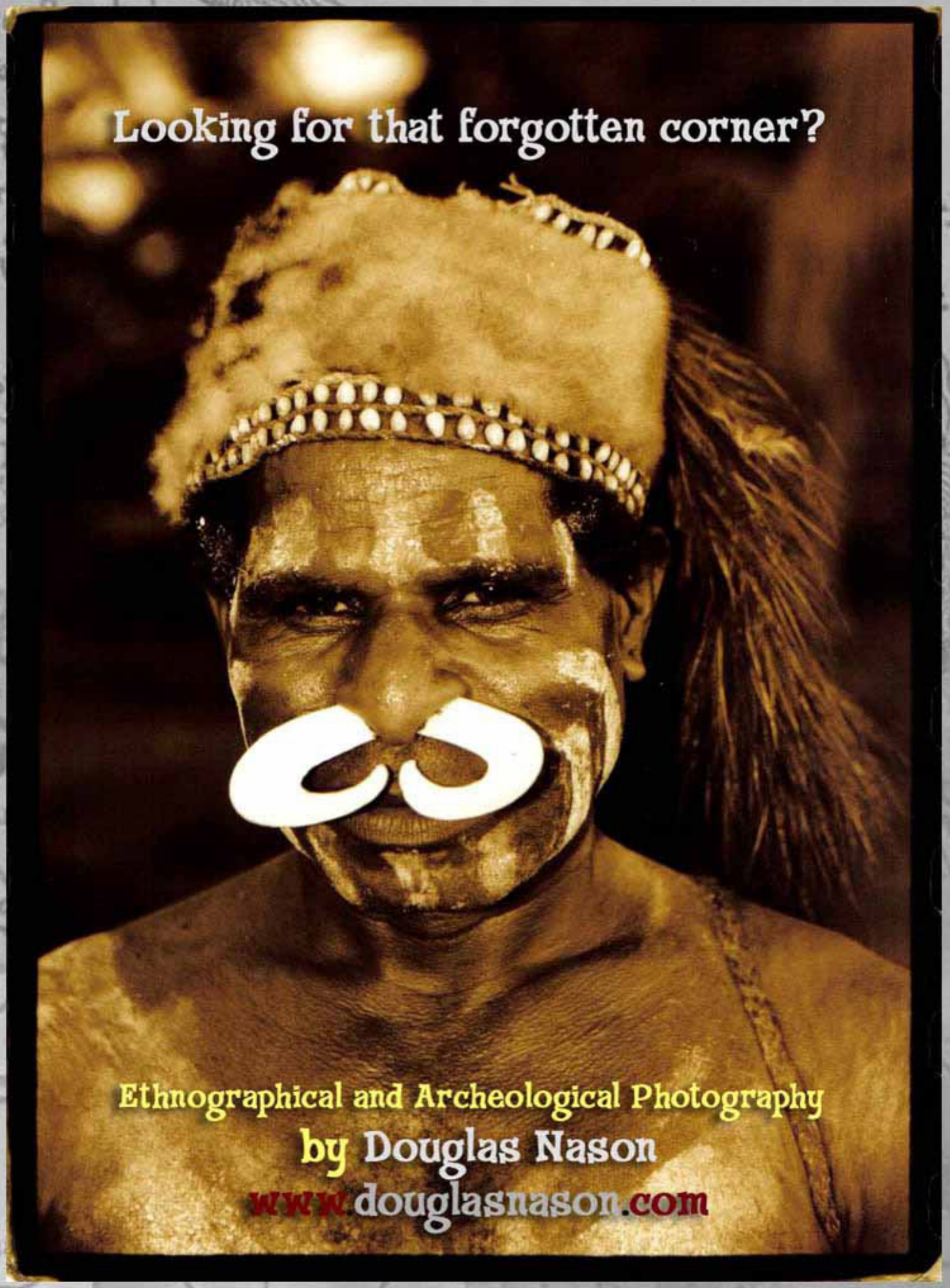
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THE TERRIFYING CONCLUSION!
SECRET OF
THE AMAZON QUEEN
E.A.GUEST'S ORIGINAL TALE OF LOVE AND HORROR

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The bedchamber of the queen was thick with darkness and the scent of sandalwood and fragrant blossoms. Two braziers burned low below the foot of the pile of pillows and paddings covered in silk. Candles burned in stands just above the head. The light of the flames was very dim and flickered shadows everywhere. The only sound was the gentle rippling of a water fountain somewhere in the darkness. The scene was set for intimacy and seduction.

Corbin lay on the bedding, propped up on an elbow. He was still clothed, except for his boots and stockings. His shirt was unbuttoned, his chest exposed. He looked around the room, collecting the images in his mind, assessing the dimensions. He had sipped three times from the wine in the silver goblet he held, to summon the courage of what he was about to do. Hoping it would work, he braced himself as he saw her appear in the dim firelight.

She looked spectacularly desirable. Her black lustrous hair, the curves of her breasts and hips and legs. Her eyes she had just lined in black so their dark allure was even more irresistible and exotic. The dim light cast the lines of her face in the most flattering sculpture he had seen yet. Her lips had to be tasted, her tongue encountered. She was just too goddamned beautiful to not desire and have. So incredibly, desirably feminine in a way that would keep a man awake all night just imagining how it would be to touch her, to explore her treasures. Standing there at the foot of the bedding, she looked down on him with equal desire, those unearthly appetizing lips parted with her heavy breath. "I have never wanted a man so much as I want you this moment."

Corbin felt his fingers grip the chalice tighter. He raised it to his lips and finished off the remaining wine in it. Then he reached up to her.

Califia let her robe fall to the floor and she went to him. Her naked body melted into his and she wrapped her lovely arms around his strong shoulders.

Mahia was mortified at what she saw. She had never let herself dream that it would come to this, for her faith in life since meeting Claude had become wings with which she flew. He had been her savior from a life of ridicule and torment in her homeland. The one option existing had been refused her, out of jealousy. Without that, she would have been a thing to be laughed at or feared. Then a ship came and on it Claude, who noticed her immediately and understood. He knew everything about her the first moment he saw her, and simultaneously fell deeply in love with her. Their night of passion and desire was found out and he fled with her on the boat. They had returned to his world, his American city, and lived there for a while, their passion carefully hidden behind the veil of her servitude. But came the discovery by one of his nephews and the scandal. That was how they had begun their travels around the world, together, seeking a refuge where their unique love would be accepted. They were to spend the rest of their lives together, embraced in their forbidden love. But, as she could see, that was all over. "Oh, my sweet Claude!"

Claude Toussaint was stretched naked, without dignity, across a wide wooden platform, wrists and ankles bound to corner posts. His fat body looked grotesque in its present posture, wide buttocks thrust upward by pillows stuffed between his groin and the platform. There was something the color of molasses between his buttocks and a viscous residue on his trembling lips and chin. He looked nearly catatonic from whatever depraved abuse had been administered here. Still conscious, he realized Mahia was in the room and tears rolled from his eyes, in dreadful shame.

Mahia went to him and held his head close to her, and she cried, "What did they do to you?"

His speech was thick, "You don't want to know, my Sweet Mahia"

She knew what was happening. His heart could not take whatever they had done.

But he had something to say. "Listen listen to me. I resisted best I could. As you can see they forced themselves I knew they meant to kill me."

Mahia sobbed quietly.

"Mahia my dearest little girl They meant to kill me. But they also wanted information. They wanted to know more about you. As they pushed me for it I realized, I could spare you. I saw they valued you. They would not hurt you My pretty girl Mahia"

"Oh my Monsieur Claude" Mahia understood. They had been pressing him about her, hoping they would be right so they could dethrone Califia. He had told them everything, in order to save her. To spare her life was his last act as they did what they did to him. So, they knew, at last.

Claude was fading, "My heart will not last. But I had to tell them. They will not hurt you now. You.. are safe. You will have a home my sweet little lover girl"

Mahia watched his watery eyes slip out of focus, and he was gone.

She collapsed onto the floor, sobbing in the deepest pain she had ever felt in her life.

Califia was afloat in desire. Her head light from wine and lust, she held Corbin's body tight against her own, and still did not feel close enough to him. Her mouth on his neck, she raced her tongue back and forth across the stubble of his beard-growth, tasting the salt of his sweat. She clutched his hair with her slender fingers, digging her nails lovingly into his scalp. His big firm body electrified her hunger to have him and give herself to him, to be taken like a woman. She wanted his hands all over her. She wanted to feel him squeezing the flesh of her buttocks and probing intimately between with his strong fingers. She wrapped her legs around his, her naked breasts mashing against his strong naked chest. Her hungry mouth moved down his neck, as her trembling hot body slid down. She wanted to taste all his flesh. Her flesh crawled with flaming desire to have his manhood invade her. She wanted to climb atop him and open herself to be filled by his own desire to be inside her-- to be ravished like all the women he had ravished before, to be taken like a whore, wantonly, with depravity and no shame. She felt herself throb with need, below her own rock hard member and she could not wait. She had him in her

bed, and she wanted him inside her now, this very moment.

Califia sat up to open Corbin's pants and release his hard desire, to please him first with her warm, wet mouth before taking him inside her other place and forever winning him over to her unique passion no woman could ever match.

That was when Corbin took Califia in his strong hands and pulled her up his body, her beautiful naked ass on his lap, her face to his and those luscious lips of hers an inch from his own. She looked him in the eyes as deeply as she had anyone, communicating her submission. *Take me! Fuck me now!*

Corbin was hard. Impossible to control that, for Califia's feminine graces were astounding. The hardness of her erection on his navel was a bit odd, but he slid his hands up her arms, momentarily cupped her full soft breasts, then gently slid his fingers across her shoulders to lightly caress her smooth, wonderful neck. Her body felt good. Califia's lips were aflame with fever as they found his. He had her where he wanted her. *Califia, Queen of the Amazons!*

Her hand was sliding into his pants and her fingers quickly wrapped around his hard member.

Corbin gently slipped both hands to her face and caressed, then slid them down, tense in anticipation of what he was about to do.

Califia's kisses on his mouth became interrupted by breathy moans as she anticipated his invasion of her. She could almost feel him, craving the moment she felt him finally force into her. *Please now!* She had his hardness gripped in one hand.

Corbin held his breath. He marveled at how smooth and silky the skin of her neck felt.

And then it happened.

Califia had his manhood free and ready to penetrate her.

Corbin's fingers pressed against her neck. Califia, panting with lust, was having difficulty breathing, and yet Corbin's fingers were tightening. Califia tried to speak. She opened her sleepy eyes.

Corbin suddenly gripped her throat and squeezed even harder. His eyes were cold. With one swift move, he rolled her onto her back, one strong hand like a vice on her neck. Pinned down

between his strong thighs and his weight, Califia could barely squirm as he drew his face near hers and said through gritted, teeth, "*I've got you now, you murderous bitch!*"

The horrible truth startled her. She could not breathe. *She could not move.*

Corbin had held his rage in check, had controlled the sickening desire to kill her in the vault and along the trail and when she first climbed all over him. He knew he had to have her in a state where he could take her by surprise. He had guessed right. Her weakest state was in the heat of the lust that made her a monster. Only then could he have overtaken her, when she believed he wanted her and they would truly be alone. He almost laughed as she tried to squirm from under him and her struggle was fruitless. Her face was turning red as she fought to breathe. Her eyes were afright. "Now, you godforsaken cunt, you're going to pay your debt to Vicci, to Cooper, to all the young girls you have ever violated!

"Your reign is ended! Here and now"

Califia's eyes widened as they stared into his.

Corbin felt no remorse. He secured his grip on her neck and with one squeeze, using the full strength of his arm channeled through the muscles down to his big hand and fingers, he delivered the final blow. Her throat gave way, air-pipe collapsed. Her tongue bulged a bit from her pretty lips and her eyes slid up, glassy and no longer focused in this world.

The queen was dead. *God damn the queen.*

CHAPTER TWENTY

Claude was dead. This was not the first time in her life that Mahia had faced tormenting persecution, but this cut the deepest. Rather quickly, she gathered herself and stood before White Hair, with red puffy eyes. She knew she was in a shocked state of mind, but she had to keep moving now. The older woman waited obediently for her instruction. Mahia spoke through the emotions, "Who were they who did this?"

White Hair gulped, "The Royal Guard. But I remind you they ceased the moment they knew the truth!"

Mahia wondered about that, "How many know? What do they intend to do with Califia?"

White Hair sighed, "What would you imagine they will do? They intend to kill her. They are most likely attending to that task as we speak."

Mahia felt no remorse for Califia. She silently considered the vindication she felt over it.

"When shall you be prepared to give your answer?" White Hair queried.

Mahia looked at her, "About what? Ascension?" She knew they would expect an answer, and she wanted to delay that moment as long as possible. Until, at least, she could learn the fate of Colonel Corbin. If he remained alive, she would attempt escape with him. If he were dead, that would change everything. She may have to ascend the throne of the Amazons after all. She had to find Corbin. "Where would Califia likely be at this moment?"

"In her chamber," White hair answered dutifully.

"And what has become of my companion, the colonel?" Mahia asked as casually as possible.

White Hair seemed unconcerned, "He was taken to the Dome of the Line, and Califia was to join him there."

Mahia felt a twinge of emotion, "For what purpose? What is the Dome of the Line?"

White Hair explained, "The Dome is the crypt wherein

the queen's predecessor's lay in eternal rest. But it was more than a crypt. It is also a doorway to the past. There is always one empty sarcophagus, for the current monarch to access the past. One lays down inside and sees what has come before. Califia has designs on your friend and seeks to seduce him with the Dome's power. And her feminine ways, naturally."

"In this Dome? In a coffin?"

"No. Using the coffin's power, she seeks to convince him to stay, and be her lover."

"I thought the Amazon's use for men was strictly culinary?"

White Hair smiled knowingly, "It is rare, I confess, but even the Amazon have their desires. You forget they are mainly female. Does not the female within desire to be taken by a man?"

Mahia felt a slight panic. If the colonel had succumbed to Califia, what would happen then?

White Hair continued, "Califia is a beautiful one. Very difficult to resist for any man."

But Mahia believed she knew Corbin, "Not for him. His tastes are what you would expect. I know. I spent several weeks in the jungle with that man. Take me to Califia's chamber."

Corbin had gathered his nerves and washed his sweaty face in a basin of cool water behind Califia's bedding. He looked over at the queen's lifeless body and thought of Achilles and how the great warrior had found an Amazon queen so irresistibly beautiful that he committed necrophilia with her. Califia was an excitingly beautiful what? *Demon from hell, no doubt. Just what are you tempting me with, God? Just what are you saying?*

Cold-blooded murder was not his style. Corbin felt a bit shaken by what he had done, but not guilty, by any means. Califia had slaughtered an innocent man and served him as dinner. She would have certainly done the same to Toussaint or Howell, no matter how he himself would have complied with her insidious lust. Since his own tastes did not follow that path, Corbin knew such compliance was out of the question. His reaction was to the female charms of Califia, and his wrath was in response to her murderous nature. He held no

grudge against her sodomist nature. Hell, he'd seen too much of the world and men away from civilization for long periods to pass judgment on that. Like a man, she had a tally-whacker and liked to use it. It was the vicious way she used it that offended him. Corbin had never had much tolerance for rape. Califia got what she asked for.

His thoughts were interrupted by the noisy arrival of the royal guard, led by the big blonde. They were armored. Silently, they stood over their dead queen, an expression of disbelief shared among them. The blonde looked to him, "You did this?"

Corbin dried his face on his shirt before putting it back on. He wondered how he would escape this. "And I'll kill any of you who put your hands on me."

But the warrior women did not appear to be hostile. The blonde captain looked back at Califia's body, perplexity in her eyes. "We did not understand. I regret to say, we did not understand until your friend until he explained, and then I'm afraid it is too late for him."

Corbin felt his head spin and he stepped toward them, "What the hell are you saying?! What do you mean too late? Who?"

"Claude," the voice that responded was familiar. Mahia had entered the chamber escorted by White Hair and two guards. Her expression was grim but resolute. "I am sorry, Colonel. Claude is dead. Howell, also."

What the hell had happened?! Corbin absorbed the news like a blow to the chin. "But how?"

Mahia noticed that Califia did not move. She rushed forward to the queen's bed and stood wide-eyed over the body. She looked at Corbin, "What have you done?"

Corbin answered without emotion, "I paid her back for her sins. What happened to Claude and Kurt?"

Mahia sighed, "Mister Howell returned from their doctor with what we needed, but he accidentally poisoned himself. Claude was tortured to death. This has all happened so fast."

"What?" Corbin wondered, and he wondered mainly why she had been escorted here.

There was something changed in Mahia. Surely Claude's death had more impact on her than this. She explained,

"We are safe, Colonel, as it turns out. Claude gave them some information I never dreamed they wanted. But it makes sense to me now. It all makes sense to me now."

Corbin was really in the dark now. "I think it's your turn to tell me why you are here."

Mahia sighed and paced across the room. "Claude rescued me from my old life. A life of torment to be sure. He always promised that he would find me a home. A true home. When we were rejected in America, it almost broke his heart and mine. His family did not accept me. The truth was too foreign for them to handle."

Corbin tucked in his shirt, "Mahia, America has several men who have brought wives home from exotic lands."

Mahia looked at him with her pretty eyes, "It is more complicated than that, Colonel. I tried to tell you before. There is something you don't know about me. I come from a kingdom in the east, where girls like me are a delicacy, of sorts. We are desired by both men and women of the court."

Corbin raised his eyebrows, mildly surprised. He was not unfamiliar with lesbians, nor with how such tastes were indulged among the elites. He just had not thought of Mahia that way.

She continued, "I was quite popular among the princes and princesses for my unique qualities. But when my secret was discovered, I suddenly became a threat to the king's royal line."

Corbin didn't follow, "How does a female courtesan threaten a king? Bastard children of courtesans understand their position and often live good lives regardless."

Mahia spoke plainly, "But bastard sons of princesses pose a problem of succession."

Corbin still did not understand yet. "This is not making sense. How does a courtesan threaten a king when a princess is found with an unexpected child?"

Mahia stared at him, waiting. The others in the room waited silently.

Then it struck Corbin. He looked at the dead Califia, then back at Mahia. "Unless the courtesan is not quite female?"

Mahia did not avert her eyes. Without shame, she looked at Corbin, as she reached up and

untied her sarong. She unwrapped it and held it open, revealing her nakedness beneath; revealing the secret truth of her life: between her thighs hung a dark cinnamon brown flaccid male organ, completely devoid of hair.

Holy shit! Corbin found this too much to be true. *What the hell is going on here?!*

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Mahia calmly wrapped her sarong back into place. "It was discovered that I had the ability to impregnate women. If any of the princesses became pregnant with my seed, suddenly their secret desire would become their public shame. I had to be removed. Fortunately, my sweet Claude was there when this happened, and he saved my life by taking me away."

Corbin suddenly thought of Claude Toussaint, and realized the truth. It must have shown on his face.

"Please do not judge Claude harshly," Mahia pleaded gently, "He could not resist his urges, and we truly loved each other."

Corbin would not judge Toussaint. He was just surprised for a moment. "So what now?"

Mahia approached the body of Califia again, "It seems you have solved a problem for them. You see, there was a prophecy Califia was the last of her line and another would come. The reason she was queen was the same reason I was banished from my home."

Corbin understood suddenly, "She was able to impregnate women."

Mahia nodded, "There you have it, Colonel. The secret of the Amazons. Men are mere toys--and food--for them. Their queen has always had the ability to replenish their population through mating with selected females who bear the children."

"What do they do with the male babies?" Corbin suddenly felt angry.

Mahia had not considered this. She shot a look at White Hair. "Well?"

White Hair could not look at them, "They are discarded, of course, as she told you."

Corbin knew better, "You goddamned monsters! You really do eat the male babies!"

Mahia's response was resolute, "This will happen no more."

Corbin looked at her and wondered why the royal guard and this White Hair had seemed quiet and respectful in Mahia's presence. "Mahia, what is going on here?"

She managed a smile, though weakly, "You are safe to go. However, I am staying."

Corbin was beginning to piece together an answer to his questions. "Why? What has changed with these monsters? What has changed with you?"

"Because I carry potent seed," she explained, "They want me to stay."

"As their slave to create more like them, no doubt," Corbin eyed the blonde captain with disdain. He remembered how this one had particularly enjoyed raping the young girls at the feast.

"No, Colonel," Mahia said matter-of-factly, "As their queen."

What?! Corbin had not expected this.

Mahia walked over to him and placed her hands on his, "Colonel, it is meant to be. Califia had to be deposed. None among them can give potent seed to their child bearers. They will die off if they have no queen. I know what you're thinking. I assure you, the atrocities Califia indulged in will be indulged no more. They will be taught new ways, of love and mercy. There will be no more feasts of rape and roasted men. Men who wander here will be treated with hospitality and sent on their way, and females will bear my children by choice, not force."

Corbin looked Mahia in the eyes, "I'll be damned. I don't know exactly what to say. They accept you as their queen?"

Mahia nodded and smiled, and looked beautiful, "My destiny, as it turns out."

Corbin sighed deeply and shook his head, "I'll be damned. Just one thing bothers me. I've never seen such a goddamned pretty man!"

Mahia laughed, "Colonel, what I admire most about you is how typical you are! Yet, atypical

in that you still do not judge me harshly."

Corbin sheepishly pulled his hands away from Mahia's. "You mean no harm to anyone. Uh, but excuse me. Kind of odd holding hands with, you know."

Mahia laughed again, "Colonel, I must now send you on your way. But first, you must have something I suspect you need." Mahia reached into her sarong pouch and produced the compass, which she then handed to Corbin.

He took it and looked at it. "It works! But how?"

Mahia shrugged, "Before he died, Mister Howell placed the compass on the magnetic door. The needle came loose and worked again. He told me to tell you to go north by northeast."

The magnetic door! It had recharged the compass in some way; released it from what the anomaly had done. Corbin felt relieved. "Thank you, Kurt. God rest your soul."

Mahia then said, "What about your soul, Colonel?"

"What about it?" Corbin responded.

Mahia looked at him with that expression of deep wisdom she had mastered so well, "The compass is more than just your way home. It is a message. From someone far away, I suspect."

Corbin felt light-headed, "What do you mean?"

Mahia explained, "Your soul is troubled. You are at odds with God. This journey is because of your troubled station with Him, and yet God never meters out the penance without the answer to salvation. You are here because the answer to your troubles is to be found here. I believe the compass may be your answer."

Corbin did not understand.

Mahia elaborated, "The bond between all living things. That mysterious force we have in common with each other, and with the world we live on. When Mister Howell fixed the compass, I remembered Claude teaching me about the ways of the scientific mind. I also suddenly recalled the point in your story about the things you had done to yourself to forget the pain of losing your ladylove. I wondered of them all what had angered God the most. And then I understood. And you will, too, once you reverse the effect."

"Reverse what effect?" Corbin wondered.

Mahia raised her hand and smiled, leading him away, toward the entry, "Come with me. I believe I have the answer."

White Hair interjected and her face showed nothing short of dread. "Your Majesty, I fear it may not be as simple as you think."

Corbin did not like the fearful tone in the old woman's voice.

As the worst of news is often delivered without buffering preamble, White Hair continued, "The process you speak of requires the fee of the gods."

"Fee of the gods?" Corbin repeated, swallowed, and generally did not like the sound of it. He looked to Mahia, whose sudden pensive expression was no encouragement.

Mahia spoke evenly, "It appears your labors are not at the end just yet. There is one more."

Corbin had felt this similarly mouth-drying sort of nervousness only in the moments before going into impending combat. "And what is that?"

Mahia looked him in the eyes, but she was frankly unable to soften her fearful expression, "To obtain the fee of the gods requires a journey."

"To where?"

"A place you will never be able to forget, I'm afraid."

"And what is this fee?"

White Hair told him, "Gold coins. Made of the gold of Hephaistos' mines. Their polarity was set many dark ages ago. You will need Hephaistos' golden coins to right yourself."

Hephaistos. Corbin knew the name. From schoolboy days, when he was taught mythology. Certainly, this was allegorical for some vein of gold they had hidden near the city. But it bothered him that Mahia, who was as new to this city as he was, seemed to be as aware of this gold of Hephaistos. "What exactly will I do with these coins?"

White Hair elaborated, "If I understand her majesty, we must melt the gold and mold a new head-piece for the Queen's Staff. This will excorsize the entity."

That jolted Corbin. "What entity?!"

White Hair shrugged nonchalantly, "The entity who posesses you, naturally. It is the cause we have usually found for a reversal of human polarity."

Aw, Christ! Corbin felt a chill in his limbs.

Mahia tried to calm him down, "Now, Colonel. Do not let yourself be gripped in fear. It will not help. You must keep your wits where you are going."

Corbin looked at her, "I do not like the sound of that."

"I'm sorry," Mahia said, "But it must be done. You must go there and return with the gold in order to save your life and your soul. You are a soldier. You can do this."

She was right. Damn her, she was right. Corbin knew he had to take the first step or this swelling discomfort in his nerves would paralyze him. As he had done throughout the war and at other hazardous moments in his life, Corbin took a deep breath and let out a sigh. "All right. All right, where do I go?"

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The royal guard escorted Mahia, Corbin and White Hair to the corner of the Amazon city where the domed mausoleum stood. Corbin saw it glowing in the moon light and he nudged Mahia, "Not this place again."

But before she could inquire, they marched past the silent stone dome and continued on a gravel path into the darkness of a hedge garden Corbin had not seen before. The path continued straight for several paces before winding left, then zigzagging deeper into a bowl in the tall hedge corridor. The path ultimately ended at a black iron gate.

White Hair turned and faced the group, her back to the heavily wrought portal suspended upon sunken hinges in a stone framework. She raised her hands, "Beyond this gate you will find it increasingly difficult to continue, though you must, if you hope for salvation."

"Enough with the doom," Corbin was bracing himself. It couldn't be worse than the mental trip in the sarcophogus, he told himself. But he wasn't convinced. "How do I get the gold?"

The royal guard captain signaled with a hand and two of the tallest Amazons Corbin had seen yet came swiftly up before him. One held Corbin's machete seized on the day he was brought to the city with his now depleted group of associates. She handed it over to him, barely able to mask

the fear in her own eyes. Her associate, face bearing equivalent apprehension on behalf of Corbin, reached up and placed a curiously knotted leather string around his shoulders. It would be years before this was explained to him. Corbin weilded the machete and it gave him a little more confidence. Whatever waited beyond the steel door would not have it easy with him. The two soldiers quickly retreated into the escort of twelve.

"Are you telling me I have to fight for this gold?" Corbin looked to Mahia.

The new queen sighed and looked to White Hair, who explained, "The blade will facilitate your offering. And it will offer protection."

"From whom?"

"Those you make the offering to." White Hair turned and reached to a very large round knob on the door and turned it clockwise one time. From inside the steel portal there issued a resonant chiming as big as anything Corbin had heard in any cathedral or temple. There followed a slight metallic scraping as the locking mechanism was released, and suddenly the big door was opening slowly inward into a shadowy darkness.

As the door opened, White Hair elaborated further, "Through here, you will find the entrance to Hephaistos' realm. It has always been here, from the first day our ancestors settled in this place. We know not who built it. We are simply grateful. You must go to that place with your offering and your gold coinage will be brought to you in return."

Corbin had to wonder, "In return for what?"

White Hair looked him in the eyes, "A drink." Then she turned and motioned for them to follow. By the silent, wide-eyed demeanor of the royal guard escort, Corbin gleaned that whatever this place represented scared the living hell out of these strapping, barbaric brutes. Trying to swallow the lump, he noticed his throat was rapidly drying. He followed White Hair deeper into the darkness, the torches of the escort only dimly lighting their way. Mahia was walking closer to him, he noticed. Finally, there it was before them.

Framed in cyclopean blocks cut who knew how long ago was the equally impressive slab of megalithic stone sealing

the sepulchral entrance to the realm of Hephaistos.

It looked like cold death.

Corbin had to keep talking to maintain his nerve. "A drink of what?"

White Hair stared at the slab with everyone, as she described what Corbin had to do. "Ninety-nine paces into this tunnel you will reach a stone stairway leading down to where two streams meet and become one. Their waters are blackened with soot and deadly to the living. Just before where the bank becomes a point of dark barren sand, you shall dig a pit of roughly a cubit square. Into this shall you pour the offering. Many wraiths shall approach; the dead who have died unnaturally. Sit with your blade ready, preventing them from partaking of the offering until they have paid you their fee: a golden coin of Hephaistos. Then, you must let them drink. When you have gathered eighteen of these coins, leave quietly but swiftly, while they drink from the offering pit."

"Drink what?" Corbin refused to let the dread creep any further into his limbs.

"The blood of your offering," White Hair told him, then she clapped her hands once and the escort parted for two more soldiers who dragged the offering up and lay it at Corbin's feet. Their sacrificial lamb.

Califia's lifeless naked body.

"You must go now, Colonel," Mahia urged. "Get it over with." Genuine fear touched her words.

Corbin was dealing with something he was used to, now. The moment when he had to do what was necessary. He took a deep breath as he sheathed his machete through his belt. Then he bent down, grabbed Califia's corpse by the arms and proceeded to shoulder her and stand. Her body was not yet as cold as he expected it to be. But he imagined he would have to hurry in order for the blood to flow properly. He tried to put out of his mind the rest of what awaited him, and take the task one step at a time. His sacrifice balanced well, Corbin turned his back on the nervous-looking escort of barbaric soldiers and faced the stone slab separating him from his life leading to this bizarre moment and the rest of his days spent dealing with the existence of whatever he was about to see.

Taking a small lantern from a soldier, Corbin nodded to White Hair. "Open it."

Rumbling in the ground beneath their feet, the mechanism of the massive slab blocking the sepulchral entry was activated. All eyes were on the ancient maw of darkness yawning before them, and the proceedings at hand suddenly took on an even more grave mood. The talk was over. The entry to a world most believed was only a fantasy waited for Corbin to bring homage to its mortifying reality. A gust of steam floated from the darkness, riding on a whisper of hot air emerging from somewhere deep in the bowels of the earth. It was all very real now to Corbin. With a deep sigh, he took his first step.

Mahia watched as her friend disappeared into the darkness, the lantern not seeming to offer much light as he carried the burden of his offering across his shoulders into the land of the dead. Worried for him, she turned away when the dim flame of the lantern disappeared completely and she and her escort of soldiers were left waiting with the silent White Hair.

Corbin moved steadily through the tunnel that was carved through the earth and stone. The walls and floor were bare. Nothing lived here. The odors of sulphur and mildew were strong. Though the oil lantern certainly seemed reliably long-burning, its flame offered a mere few paces illumination in any direction. Corbin was essentially passing through a world darker than shadow, heading straight into what unknown horrors lurked just beyond the measly light. Counting the paces, he sensed by the air around him and the decrease of pressure in his ears that the way ahead was opening wider. This was at eighty-six paces. *Almost to the steps...*

Corbin shifted Califia's slack body a bit and continued the remaining thirteen steps, where he had to catch his balance at the top of the damp stone stairway. He held the lantern out and found that the steps were very steeply angled and disappeared into black darkness below. Corbin was finding it harder to breathe. He had to draw deeper breaths to get even a normal fill of air in his lungs, and it tasted and smelled foul. He was glad to be out of the

tunnel for the claustrophobic feeling was not so bad as the growing idea that something could have been following him, but he was no more enthused about carrying Califia's corpse down the steep steps into God knew what. But it had to be done, so he decided it safest to drag her body down to the bottom. He kneeled down and relieved his shoulders of the burden. Grasping her long black mane, Corbin held the lantern out and proceeded down the steps.

With each step, Califia's body thumped behind him. Corbin wished he had brought something to cover his mouth and nose. The air was becoming hot now, and putrid, the steam as heavy as the sweat pouring down his forehead. He just wanted to reach the bottom now, and worry about what would be waiting once he could be on firmer ground than the precariously narrow steps of this dangerously steep stair. Finally, he did reach the bottom and gladly stepped onto the hard-packed sandy ground, Califia's heels thumping down the final two steps along behind him.

Corbin surveyed what little he could see. The ceiling of this cavernous space seemed high, for the lantern light could not reach it. The water was near, for he could smell its stagnant odor and feel the humidity. The air was even thinner down here. It would be difficult to fight, if he had to. Touching the handle of the machete stuck in his belt, Corbin took several deep breaths to obtain a comforting fill of air in his lungs just once before proceeding. That done, he grabbed Califia's black hair again and stepped forward.

As White Hair had described, Corbin reached the place where the streams joined. The ground did, indeed, come to a point. Corbin dragged Califia's body to within a few paces from the appropriate spot, then set the lantern down on the ground and drew his blade. He did not want to be here any longer than he had to, though he was not anxious to see what he would see. Desirous to get his gold and get out of this place, Corbin dropped to his knees and set about digging the pit, one cubit square in the mercifully giving sand.

Finally, it was done. Corbin was covered in sweat and his lungs had begun to hurt. Hands dirty with sooty sand, he sheathed the machete into his belt

again and turned toward the former queen's corpse. He took her now cooling hands and dragged her body to the pit, until her head hung over the edge, her once bewitching countenance facing down. Corbin then positioned himself with his knees on either side of her shoulders and took her hair in one hand. Lifting her head, Corbin drew the blade from his belt and stared into the darkness of the stream. The time had come for him to make the offering and face whatever would emerge this terrible place.

Positioning the long blade's sharp edge against Califia's neck, Corbin made the first cut, slicing into the flesh. With one draw, he opened her throat wide to the bone, opening the font of her jugulars. The dark blood gushed forth into the pit, quickly pooling, then filling the space. The blood ran rather well, so long after her death, and within a minute or so, its depth was rising above to an inch before slowing. Corbin had lived through brutal combat, but he did not like human carnage any more now than he had before his soldiering days. He scanned the darkness to distract himself from the gorey business. Satisfied, Corbin stood on his feet and raised the lantern high, trying to see what he could in its pitiful glow, the silence disturbingly heavy.

And then they came.

The lost dead. The heavy silence was broken by the gentle splashing in the nasty waters, as they followed the scent of the blood beckoning them from their sleepless hell. Up from Hades they had arisen, and very thirsty. Just the sound of their movement brought bumps to Corbin's skin, but when the first of them emerged close enough to the edge of the light to be seen, Corbin was struck pallid with fear. "*Oh my god...*"

It was one thing to sit at night alone by the firelight and tease one's nerve with the fantasies of writers described in vivid literary detail – but it was all too unsettling to willfully enter the land of the damned, surrounded by ghouls as real as the hairs standing on the back of your neck. Even a brave soldiering man like Corbin felt his knees losing their resolve and his bladder threatening to unloose. The sight was incomparably bad for his mind. He felt himself drop to the ground and his shaking hand unsheath the machete, as the

dead drew even closer to the pit of blood. There was a young girl, still aching from her first agony at the hands of her rapacious murderer. She was followed by an old man weeping in eternal sorrow over the evils he had all too willingly followed here, and a woman of middle years gnashing her teeth in aguish at the curses that loosed the grip on her mind and drove her to her damning treacheries against her defenseless children--pale and dark-eyed, clinging to her ragged skirt, starving for the nourishment of the blood. Soon, there were several more of these withering, pale faced wraiths, reaching out for the pit of offering. Gathering enough of his wits to remember his purpose, Corbin brandished his sharp weapon to forbid the shambling legion from drinking the blood until they had paid him the fee of Hephaistos' golden coins.

One by one, they approached. The girl first, her cold grey hand holding out a golden coin shining in the dim lantern light. She stared at him with the dark pits of her dying, sinking eyes as he carefully reached out and took the coin from her. He lowered the blade a bit and indicated she could take her fill. The sight of the white-fleshed bony girl, barely covered by her dirty, rotting coffin shroud, dropping to her knees and lowering her face to the pool of blood like an animal was just not something anyone should ever have to have seen. The sound of her slurping and gulping sickened Corbin and he paid his attention to the old man, wide-eyed in anticipation for his share, and the cursed mother ready to forsake her children's thirst to sate her own. Taking coins from them, he indicated with a shaky wave of his machete that they, too, could drink from the pit.

If it were to be even this easy, the gathering of these coins would forever haunt Corbin's memory. But fate had more in store for him, perhaps to mercifully emphasize his remaining opportunity to avoid damnation. Possessing five of the requisite eighteen coins, Corbin did his best not to look directly in their dark forever-staring eyes the others who came, as they lined up to pay their fee for a taste of fresh blood. Six, seven, eight, nine, ten – the coins filled his shaky hand. One by one, the wretched undead took their place, face

down in the pool, sucking mouthfuls of Califia's warm, thickening blood. It was a horrid sight, but not as memorable as that to come, for there were eight more coins to be collected, and there were more ghouls in the shadows, their approach heralded by their sluggish steps through the stagnant black water.

Corbin managed a bare grip on his sanity as more approached. Eleven, twelve, thirteen – the tally mounted. He could soon leave this place, but not yet. The pool was now crowded. There was one on each side of Califia's corpse, lapping noisily. Fourteen, fifteen – Hephaistos' golden currency managed a shimmer in the dim lantern light. Corbin secured them to his pants pocket. *Only three more to gather...*

And then the cards were played.

At the very moment Corbin was realizing that he was there alone with fifteen bloodthirsty wraiths, there came two more figures from the darkness. The first was a large and brutish man and when his pale tormented features became clear in the lantern's glow, Corbin caught his own breath. There was no mistake that Corbin knew this man, for the gaping wound in the brute's chest was most familiar.

Mungo McShane!

Mungo had come straight here the moment he breathed his last on the pier in San Francisco, his blood dripping off Corbin's sword. He looked at Corbin with slack eyes, recognition of no apparent concern. In his giant beefy hand, Mungo extended a shimmery golden coin. His primary need was for the hope of nourishment fresh blood promised. Though his appearance was startling, it appeared he was no threat. Corbin took the coin and waved the big man toward the crowded pool.

But Mungo did not move to join the others yet. Instead, he stepped aside and looked back to the darkness.

And there emerged a solitary figure, slender and lithe, bony and blue with grave rot. The shredded gown barely covered the skeletal legs, dying flesh stretched over them like hellish stockings. One breast sagged like an empty leather bag, exposed through a large tear in the mocking garment. The nipple was gnarled and blackened. This figure, once a woman, held out a

bony arm covered in taut blued skin, and offered her golden fee in the palm of her aging hand, a diamond ring hanging loose from one finger. In her other arm, she carried a small rounded bundle, obscured in shadow.

But it was not merely this which caused Corbin's knees to give out.

It was the dead woman's voice.

"Julius... I have missed you."

Corbin could not have imagined anything so frightful to gaze upon as that face which stared at him now. Bluish skin stretched taut over a skull, its hair stringy, thinning and matted with the filth of Hell. The smile of green rotting teeth offered as if a gift of pearly beauty. None of this, nor anything he had seen yet in this forsaken place, matched the the unsettling horror of the eyes: They were blackened with death, like the sickening gelatinous orbs of a fish left to rot in the sun, and bulging slightly from dark, sinking sockets. The pupils seemed a bright red pinpoint in the lantern's glow, and aimed right at him. Demonic as her appearance was, Corbin was terror-stricken in his recognition of the woman, and he dropped to sit on the ground, barely able to hold the wavering machete, his other arm across his abdomen, as if to hold his nerve within.

Helene Dellacapri! Once the most heavenly beauty he thought he had ever laid eyes upon, she was now the most disturbing and ghastly wretch his mind could handle. What had happened to her? What had brought her to this place? Under other circumstances, his clear mind could readily answer those questions, for her character had proven damnably flawed. But sitting in this place, in the darkness, the slurping of blood echoing all around, Corbin could only stare at this frightful wraith and wonder why he did not just run screaming, out of his mind. He suddenly wondered if he would be able to get back onto his feet before they were finished.

Helene had not changed in one way. "Oh, Julius, you have come to see me. I always believed that you still held me in some corner of your heart. Now, you are here!"

Corbin managed to respond, "Helene... What happened to you?"

The ghoulish woman's eyes left him for a moment and looked off somewhere into another place and time. "I suppose you were right about Stefan and me. We did get what we deserved..."

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

"After San Francisco, Stefan and I went to the Orient. Between his gambling and my charms, we gathered enough money to reach a port in Nippon where we then took up with a travelling sheik on a tour of eastern China. It was expedient for Stefan and I to pretend to be siblings, for the sheik desired to add me to his harem and showered me with gifts of rare gems that Stefan hid within the seams of our bags. I could only lead the sheik on for so long, and soon it became expedient for us to take up with a merchant heading for Bangkok. The merchant introduced us to his dear friend, a diamond miner on holiday from Johannesburg. Immediately, Stefan and I saw the benefit of that relationship, and I found myself in the miner's bedchamber that very night.

"Naturally, the diamond miner was smitten, for my beauty was powerful, if you recall. He fell in love and asked that I return with him to Africa, accompanied by my dear brother, of course. The passage back to Africa was lengthy, yet the most exotic journey I ever took. The diamond miner showed us the mysterious islands of Malaysia. He introduced us to the glories of Ceylon. We crossed the Indian Ocean to Zanzibar, and by that time, the diamond miner was determined to marry his Aphrodite. I had convinced him of that in my own very special way.

"South Africa was luxuriant. The diamond miner was far wealthier than I imagined. The finest clothes, the opulent house, the richest food and wine – nothing was too good for the goddess bride and her devoted brother. Stefan and I were in heavenly bliss. Only when the master of the house was home did I need to sate his desire – which was satisfying to me as well, for I always craved intercourse myself anyway. But he was away for weeks at a time,

tending to his mines, leaving Stefan and I alone in his wonderland. We were left free to satisfy our eternal need for each other every night in the big bed, or the gazebo of the hedge maze, or often under a lean-to on the beach at night. Many times, after Stefan had removed my skirts and mounted me, I pretended he really *was* my brother.

"But it was not to last, this paradise.

"One night, after the suspicious servants had retired to their quarters, Stefan lay on his back in the middle of the bed while I gave him service in the style taught me by French Creole girls in the New Orleans bordello. I was lost in the heated pleasure this act always secretly gave me, when the door flew open and there stood my husband, the enraged and cuckolded diamond miner. I suppose the sight of his wife's bare buttocks in the air as she gorged her mouth on her brother's ecstatic member was too much for him to reckon with, and he strode to the bed, bellowing at me in fury, at the very moment I had coaxed Stefan's delightful issue.

"I will not bore you too much with the details of our demise. I was forcefully pulled off Stefan, scratching his delicacy with my teeth, his sweet gift spilling off my lips. No amount of begging could calm the poor man. I tried to explain that Stefan was not my brother, really, but the diamond miner was in a fury. My dear Stefan was dragged away to a chair and bound tautly. I was also bound, but on my back across the bed. Poor Stefan had to observe as over a dozen of my husband's miners, all black Africans, were marched in and given free reign of my pleasures. I must say, the prowess and size spoken of in some circles about the African males is a disappointing lie. There were but two of them who ravaged me with a sizable tool, but most were as average as any man, and a couple pitifully unfit for such duty. I have encountered as many white men, and several Spaniards and Mexicans who were deliciously large as any Negro. But, it was not the raping by the African brutes holding me down and contorting me into various positions for their relentless animal pleasures that killed me.

"The diamond miner allowed the men to take me for over two hours. I was sweaty, my

hair soaked; and I was bloody and raw between my legs in both places they had roughly and repeatedly penetrated. My breasts were bruised with mistreatment, punctured by teeth marks, one nipple bit clear through and bleeding. I had no doubt that any of those twelve bestial men had filled my womb with the seed of a burden I was certain my wronged husband would leave me with as final, lifelong punishment. As I lay there, unable to move save for the twitching of muscles, I had begun to contemplate that dreaded possibility.

"But the man still harbored enough rage to spare me the shame of giving birth to a socially unacceptable child. Stefan was dragged screaming from the room, and the husband produced a long and particularly nasty looking bullwhip, with which he proceeded to crack and slice across my white, ravaged flesh for several minutes, until I was sliced all about and bleeding profusely, head to toe. As I lay dying on the finest sheets I had ever slept or was raked upon, I wondered what was happening to my dear Stefan.

"I learned later that he was strapped over a barrel and provided the same ravaging given me and by the very same twelve black miners. It was probably a good thing, for this stunned him into a catatonic state surely depriving him of any feeling by the time they attended to dismembering him.

"We were buried together in a hole in the jungle forest several acres away from the house, my naked torn body and Stefan's parts." Helene had finished her tale.

Corbin attempted a deep breath, but his chest was still shaky from fright and he forced himself to stand. Still, he wondered, as the thing that was the Helene Dellacapri he once knew reached out her cold dead hand and offered the seventeenth golden coin, "Where is Stefan?"

Helene's ghoulish face took on a hideous look of softness as she stepped closer into the lantern's glow. "Why, he is right here with us. We'll be together forever!"

Corbin looked and realized what it was she carried under her arm: the rotting head of a corpse – *undead*. Its sad black eyes stared up at him and its green-toothed smile grinned wider, a

single golden coin clenched tight between. *Stefan!*

"He is desparately thirsty," Helene said, "I have brought him here to drink."

Corbin took the coin from Stefan's teeth. Then he reached out his palm and Helene dropped her fee into it, clinking against her lover's. Corbin pocketed the coins. Seventeen, eighteen. He had them all. He stood aside and waved Helene toward the pit, and felt sickened as she ambled over, dropped to her bony knees, and lowered her lover's head so that he could drink his share of the blood offering. Satisfied that he was taken care of, Helene herself bent over and began to drink her share from the increasingly shallow pool.

Dropping the remaining two coins into his pocket, Corbin felt strength returning to his legs. He would need all he had to ascend the steep stair. He licked his parched lips and watched as the ghoulish undead noisily drank. It would not last much longer. Califia's body only had so much blood. And their thirst was eternal. Once hers was gone, they would look elsewhere.

Corbin knew he had to get out of there. He made for the steps when something caught his eye.

Califia's leg had shifted.

As Corbin pondered this, he noticed a few of the drinkers had paused, the thickening blood dripping from their chins. They were looking at him now. Wondering. And then, Califia's arm moved.

Corbin gripped the machete tighter and forced a nervous swallow. He had his gold. It was time to go. He turned to the stair just as Califia began to stir and get up onto her knees. *Of course! This would be her fate!*

A few more of the ghouls had stopped drinking and were also staring at Corbin, as he carefully picked up the lantern and turned toward the stair. Califia was now up on her knees, her back to him, as if waking from a slumber. There was now a low hubbub among them as they considered their insatiable thirst and the options for feeding it. Corbin knew Califia would give them one particular idea. His best diversion would be to get their attention – and solve his problem with the Amazon queen once and for all.

Quickly and calmly, Corbin walked up behind Califia.

He raised his blade and held it a moment for them all to see and understand. Then he swung it wide, and separated Califia's head from her body. *Let her spend eternal damnation like Stefan.*

The ghouls all stood motionless, mortified by what he had done. This gave Corbin his lead and he took it, running up the stone steps as fast as his legs would take him. The adrenaline was pumping now, giving him the strength he needed. Two, four, eight steps, Corbin climbed before the ghouls realized their feast was escaping. Their cries were loud and frightful, as they ambled toward the steps in pursuit.

Corbin's breath was heavy and rapid as he ascended the stone steps, arms and hands shaking, legs surprisingly powerful. Not wanting to turn and see, he knew they were following. He could hear them, shifting feet on the steps, wailing cries for him to return. The voices of hell on his heels, the precious weight of Hephaistos' golden coins in his pocket, the hope of his salvation if he could only escape this horrible place. Pursued by the undead, Corbin ascended from the sepulchral halls of Hades, full of anxious dread that it was all a trick by the Devil to capture fools.

"Julius..."

Oh God no!

It was Helene's soft voice that rose above the clamor. Her once-sweet voice now garbled and thickened by the clotted blood in her ghastly throat. She called out to him, "*Don't you want to kiss me now*?"

Corbin reached the top of the stair, but he could still hear them coming. His legs began to shake again, but he stayed up, and on them ran through the tunnel, as fast as he could, toward the stone slab.

"*JULIUS*!" Helene's voice echoed up from the deep stairwell, bouncing off the walls of the tunnel, filling his head, "*COME BACK! I STILL WANT YOU, JULIUS! I WANT YOU TO LOVE ME*!"

Corbin could see the slab of the entry.

It was still open.

"Mahia!" he called out, racing through the tunnel toward escape. "Mahia!"

Helene was at the top of the stair. "*JULIUS... DON'T YOU WANT TO TASTE MY LIPS ONE MORE TIME?*

DON'T YOU WANT TO BE INSIDE ME?"

Oh God get me out of here! Corbin sensed that something was coming after him, flying from the stair through the tunnel, closing its pursuit. He felt a chilling spasm up his spine as he imagined her hand reaching out, grasping his shirt and holding him back, dragging him with her toward the stair, toward the pit where they would slice open his throat and drink his hot spurting blood, damning him for all eternity. *Esmeralda, help me!*

Mahia and White Hair appeared in the opening, Mahia holding a torch for him to see, and calling out "Colonel! We are here!" Corbin raced the final steps and charged through the opening, as Mahia gave the order for it to be sealed.

"Close it!" Corbin gasped as he dropped to his knees and caught his breath. "Close it forever!"

Mahia kneeled at his side, hand on his shoulder. "It is closed, my friend. Do not worry."

"Don't ever open it again! Don't ever go down there!" Corbin told her between gasping breaths.

Mahia squeezed his shoulder gently, "Did you get the gold?"

Corbin nodded. The jungle air was fresh and calming, and very cool on his skin.

"All of it?" White Hair pressed.

Corbin reached into his pocket and pulled all eighteen coins out for them to see, dropping a few which Mahia quickly retrieved for him. He looked at White Hair, "Every goddamned one of them!"

White Hair nodded and smiled, "Good. We can proceed!"

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Corbin was tended by three young ladies in a hot bath, while his clothes were cleaned and mended. Meanwhile, the golden coins of Hepahaistos were taken to the blacksmith, melted, and formed into a new headpiece for the thronestaff. All of this occured within three hours, and Corbin was dressed and napping on a comfortable bed in the guest palace when the blonde captain of the Royal Guard came for him. He was escorted through the city paths toward the grand central square where Califia had addressed her subjects.

Corbin was led up the stairs and stood on the massive platform again, once more before the audience of the entire city of women. This time, they were silent in awe of their new queen, even the guards and soldiers. Mahia and Corbin stood before the throne, staring up at the immense gong. Mahia explained, "I believe your answer is right here. When placing it against the magnetic door repaired the compass, my head was suddenly filled with an understanding of many things relating to magnetism. One of them was that Claude had taught me human bodies are possessed of magnetism, also. I suddenly understood that the source of that magnetism had to be the soul. It was then I knew. I do not know exactly how. I just knew. Like the compass on the door, the human soul could fixed by magnetism. But the door could only effect a small item like the compass. Where was a magnet big enough to have an effect on a human soul?"

Corbin eyed the massive gong and began to understand. "You remembered how Califia's voice carried from here."

Mahia grinned, "I remembered how it was *projected* throughout the city! And then I understood."

So did Corbin, "She was seated before it and the staff she spoke into drew the magnetic energy. From the gong. The gong is magnetized!"

Mahia nodded, "It is, I believe, large enough to serve your need."

Corbin was amazed. Was this truly the answer to his troubles?

"Go, take the throne," Mahia instructed.

Corbin stepped forward and turned, sitting down onto the stone seat. He placed his hands on the armrests and stared out at the multitude of silent faces, and the colorful pyramids of the city, and the sky beyond. *What would happen*?

Mahia raised a hand and the two women in red robes took their positions at the sides of the gongs, at the ready. With a nod from their new queen, they struck the gong, nine times each. Eighteen times the huge disc rumbled and crashed with perfect resonance, shaking the mighty stone platform. The waves projected out from it, surrounding the throne, vibrating the pillars.

Corbin felt his body pulse with the waves. His brain tingled, his limbs became light until he could not feel them. By the ninth strike, he could not feel his body. There was only his consciousness. His vision blacked out. He felt as if his soul had been lifted from his body, and with it all the fear and hostility he had felt for so many years. As the gong was beat the eighteenth and final time, Corbin felt as if he was suddenly flipping end over end in dark space. This sensation ebbed as the mighty gong's vibration dimmed. Just before the effect subsided and the platform was left still, Corbin felt feeling in his limbs again, and his vision returned. Finally, he sat there, staring out at the silent crowd, a smiling Mahia watching with approval nearby, and he felt better than he imagined he ever could.

It had worked. Something had definitely changed within him.

He stood up. His body felt stronger than ever. He felt right with the world.

Right with God.

He noticed that even his canker sore was gone!

He looked at Mahia, "What exactly just happened?"

Mahia shrugged, "If you must insist on an explanation, I would say you restored your body's polarity to its intended position. You flipped it back the way it was meant to be. You should now find yourself in tune with the gods, and less troubled."

"But what about the entity? The old one said I was possessed."

White Hair stepped forward, holding an ornate object which she handed to Corbin.

It was a hand mirror of silver, its reflective glass shaped perfectly round and about a hand in width. It felt warm to the touch, and Corbin was startled when he looked within.

Corbin did not see himself, but instead a small man with dusky red skin color and a single eye in his forehead. "What is he?!"

"That would require an explanation," Mahia smiled and took the mirror. She handed it to White Hair. "The little one will no longer be a problem to you. Providing, Colonel, that you be very selective in your spiritual explorations from now on."

Corbin understood now. The vision with Esmeralda in the stone house had ended with him partaking in the occult mass, in the gray house in Baltimore. That was it! He had reversed his polarities that night and the little entity had a way in! Corbin had offended God when he did that. Just like Esmeralda had said. She had appeared to him that night right after he left that wretched house. And his troubles in Washington had started almost immediately after! God had let him suffer to the point he was forced to take this expedition to the very place he could repair his soul! Corbin understood, and suddenly felt foolish for all his ire. He felt the childish embarrassment the recipient of salvation often felt, as if he had been crying over the spilling of milk. His mind and heart were clear and he felt wonder again.

He also saw Mahia more clearly now, too. Whatever she was, she was in her right place. Queen of the Amazons. Corbin stood up and felt better than he had in years. Stronger. The sky was blue overhead, the jungle no longer menacing, but beautiful, rather. The city was a wonder in itself, with an ancient beauty. Where once the faces of the royal guard were grim and hostile, they now looked upon him with wide and almost child-like eyes. His veil of sorrows was lifted. He could go home now.

Suddenly, from some unseen corner, drums started beating rapidly. White Hair and two young girls approached Mahia. They were carrying a long robe of green and purple, and the golden tiara Califia had worn a day before. Corbin stood aside and watched the girls adorn

Mahia with the robe, and White Hair place the crown upon her head. Then White Hair announced loudly, in her native tongue, which Corbin did not understand, "The ascension of a new queen fulfills the ancient prophecy! Let the coronation rites begin!"

Mahia had transformed in that instant, from a fledgling princess not quite certain her destiny was real, to a queen who knew she had found her place. Corbin wryly wondered what, say, a year would do for her confidence. Maybe he would return to see for himself.

Then again, maybe not.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

With Mahia going through the coronation rites, Corbin was left alone to prepare for his return to the States. His guns and knife were returned to him, as was his pack, now laden with food and water for his journey. He had ammunition aplenty for self defense, food enough for two weeks, and would have an armed escort to the boundary marker on the far trail, if he so desired. He did not so desire. Having also gathered the most personal effects of Howell and Toussaint, Corbin insisted they be given proper rites. He watched as their bodies were wrapped and placed upon a pyre, where they were burned. Corbin whispered a prayer he had used all too often during the war when fellow soldiers were interred, and after he was satisfied that his compatriots had received an appropriate funeral, he was ready to leave the kingdom of creatures he wished to never see again. Not in judgment of them did he wish to depart, but because he had seen enough and wished to put the darkness of it behind himself. He believed that Mahia would lead these Amazonians down a new path and the atrocities of the line of Califia would not be repeated nor revered.

As Corbin prepared to take his first step into the jungle, he was stopped by a hand on his arm. He turned and was quite surprised by what he saw. "Mahia!"

Mahia stood before him in glorious raiment. A golden robe from her shoulders to her golden sandaled feet. A golden crown

similar to what he had seen in the Aztec styles in Mexico rested stately upon her head, and heavy golden baubles hung from her ears. Her pretty, dark eyes were now lined in black and took on a lustrous beauty. Her lips were also painted, blood red. On some of her fingers were large golden rings adorned with big precious stones of all colors. She was a regal beauty.

But Corbin still wondered if he should refer to Mahia as 'her' or 'his' majesty.

Mahia read his face and smiled, "I told you there was irony in your perception of me. I also told you that I knew what you look for in a woman."

Corbin sighed, "Yeah. A *woman*."

Mahia appreciated his humor, and him. "This is our farewell. Perhaps someday I will see you again, Colonel. Go safely and be well." And then Mahia leaned up, placed her hands on his shoulders, and kissed him goodbye.

Corbin was at a loss for words. He would definitely not include this part in his report. It was time to go. "Uh, yes, thank you. You be careful here, Mahia. Watch those soldiers, or whatever they are. They seem tame now, but you never know what they'll stir up, in time. Oh, and teach them to eat chicken or beef or something."

Mahia laughed, "Go, Colonel! You have many days in the jungle alone. You had better get started."

Corbin gave her a respectful nod, put his hat on, and checked the action on his rifle. Then, taking a deep breath, he turned and headed toward the jungle trail beyond the stone archway.

The journey through the jungle alone was peaceful. Corbin was blessed with cool weather, and slept well at night. The food provided to him consisted of dried meats which he knew were of various reptiles, thankfully, and many delicious dried fruits. They had even given him a small skin of red wine, and their local pipe tobacco, which was a rather enjoyable sort of black Cavendish. Throughout the days, Corbin walked along the jungle trail, feeling a serenity he had not known in years, and seeing the jungle in a different, more curious light. It was as if the life had returned to see him, as well, and

let him pass by as a kindred spirit whom they knew merely wanted to go home. Their presence was subtle in the shadows just off the trail, and Corbin felt like Adam before the fall, when the creatures loved and respected men. He simply knew they would not harm him, nor let him come to harm. And he knew he would return to Washington -- that viper's den -- with the strength and confidence of a triumphant soul, and may God help his enemies. For returning from this dark world of wonders was a new Julius Corbin, and they would find themselves outgunned and outclassed by something they could never be, nor ever seek to confront again.

So it was that Julius Corbin made his way north by northeast, out of the Matto Grosso, and back to his homeland, to face the rest of his many days. And never did a day pass in all the rest of his years that he did not look forward to the time for him to return to that stone house overlooking the sea of his dreams.

In the meantime, he would try to resist the allure of damnation.

The End

Julius Corbin returns in

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ALL MINE
BY BRYN COLVIN

"Nobody asked me if I wanted to be here. Now that I'm here what am I meant to do?"

The petulant voice struck a disturbing note, coming as it did from a head that lacked a discernable mouth. Doctor Brentwood's sharp intake of breath informed his three associates that this vision of foliage and trembling limbs was not quite what he had intended to summon up that night. Held in the circle, the peculiar being stretched out one mottled grey limb dismissively. There were tufts of leaves and grasses where hands might have been expected.

"Well?" it asked impatiently.

Journalist Mark Evans, the youngest of the company cleared his throat nervously. The tangled mass of twisting leaves that passed for a head angled in his direction.

"Expecting someone else?" the voice creaked, offering a dry chuckle.

"By Jove Brentwood, I do believe you've got something there." Adrian Scriven, man of letters, had finally transcended the initial shock of wonderment and found his voice. "Not what we'd been led to expect, but remarkable none the less."

Cyril Perrick, who had impassively observed their initial reactions, took the opportunity to step forward. His thinning hair was scraped severely back from his angular face, and although his eyes were barely visible beneath a heavy brow, he invariably saw more clearly than most men. Still, he remained cautious as he approached the circle Brentwood had so scrupulously painted on the floor only that afternoon. The light from the various gas lamps was poor, to Perrick's ongoing irritation. Charlatans always favoured the darkness. He studied the air above the apparition, looking for signs of strings or wires. He had gone over the room quite thoroughly before the proceedings and had found nothing, but that did not mean that there was nothing to find. Brentwood would not be the first man to ruin his reputation with false faerie manifestations, and Perrick had little tolerance for such games. It was one of the better hoaxes he had seen – it's very coarseness and lack of attention to detail made it seem more real than the doll-like fripperies he usually found. It would just be a matter of seeing how the thing was controlled and discerning the source of the voice.

"Mister Perrick!" A note of alarm entered Brentwood's voice as Perrick drew closer to the circle.

"Please Mister Perrick, I must ask you to stay away from the edge of the circle."

"Doctor Brentwood, with all due respect, I doubt this this thing is going to do me any harm. I merely want to discover how it works."

"Oh, piss off," said the apparition, sounding rather too much like a street urchin.

Perrick paused and looked at the thing more closely. He had the unsettling impression that it looked back at him. It looked almost humanoid, but so thin that there was no scope for hiding even a child within it. It could perhaps be a clockwork device, he pondered, there had been a fair few traps for the gullible from that line of science.

"Do I look like a clock? Well, do I?"

Perrick could hear the stifled amusement from those behind him, those who assumed the thing was talking nonsense. In an uncharacteristically superstitious moment, he believed it had plucked the question from his mind and answered it.

"Better believe it," came the voice from the mouthless head.

Perrick shuddered and found himself taking an involuntary step back.

"Convinced Mr. Perrick?" Brentwood asked, his composure quite recovered.

"Not quite what you encouraged us to expect, is it?" Evans, the bright-eyed journalist observed. "Enchanting faerie women I believe was what you said, unparalleled beauty."

"You don't like me?" it asked, almost sounding hurt.

The question caught Evans off his guard.

Evans was not normally one to go dabbling with the supernatural, despite such things being very much in vogue. He had met Doctor Brentwood some months previously at a lecture on hypnotism, a promising new science that had captured the young journalist's imagination. Always with an eye out for a good story, Evans had been intrigued by Brentwood's cautious claims at first, and then gradually drawn in by further tales. At the very least, he would get a good story out of ruining the Doctor's reputation, to which end he had invited along Perrick who had an almost uncanny talent for revealing frauds and hoaxes. The possibility that it might be real had tickled his fancy – he could not help but like the notion of near naked damsels who could be drawn from the ether and bound to perform certain tasks. The thing before him had failed to meet his expectations in some ways, but it was certainly interesting.

"What are you?" he asked it.

"I'm the sodding Prince of Wales. What do I look like?"

"You look like a selection of garden cuttings," he answered.

"Not what you wanted at all, is it Mr. Evans? Not nearly pretty enough for your liking. You like them very young don't you? Barely women at all, those girls in the brothels, tiny little breasts, no hips at all. You were hoping I'd be something like that, weren't you?"

"I don't know what you are talking about." Evans protested, but the other men in the room could tell he was riled. It was enough to make any man nervous – who didn't have the odd dark secret? And if this spirit could see so readily into one soul, it could do the same for another.

"Look again Mr. Evans."

Despite himself, Mark raised his eyes and looked at the thing again. He let his eyes wander over the thick tangle of ivy strands, the slender protrusions of wood and the delicate bunches of leaves. The more closely he looked, the more he could see how it resembled a human form. That mass of moss framed the pubic region, those acorns, nipples. There was a mouth in the foliage, broad and welcoming. As he gazed the thing before him became ever more like a woman. The lips parted slightly, suggesting rich kisses, hands fluttered amongst the leaves, with delicate fingers. She shifted her posture slightly, making those narrow hips more obvious. There was something faintly androgynous about her, something half formed and boyish, not quite the mature woman, not quite the man, but a magical creature that had not yet found its true form. He wetted his lips in anticipation, wanting to be touched by those alluring fronds.

The silence and the look of rapture on Evans' face were enough to tell Brentwood that all was not well. He twitched nervously, watching the motionless fruit of his evocation and the equally still form of the journalist. Brentwood feared he knew what was happening now. If he stepped forward, he would have to explain himself, which he felt wary of. If he did nothing, there was no knowing what might happen to the young man. As he deliberated, Mark Evans began to move forwards.

"Evans!" Perrick's voice was clipped and harsh. Evans ignored him.

"Stop making a fool of yourself man." There was a note of nervousness in the skeptic's voice.

As Evans plunged into the circle, Brentwood leaped forward in a vain attempt to grab him. He felt the younger man's jacket slip through his fingers, and then the man, jacket and all, vanished.

Scriven went as white as a sheet, clinging with both hands to the edge of Brentwood's desk. He stared at the place where their young companion had stood only moments before. There had been no smoke, no sound, and no scope for a trap door or any other reasonable explanation. The young man had simply ceased to be there.

"What's happening Edward," Scriven asked pleadingly, hoping that his oldest friend could explain away the vanishing.

"He went into the circle."

Brentwood said, his voice sounding distant and detached.

"I said at the outset that no one must cross the boundary and enter the circle. I told you all. Here we are safe, but in that circle we are prey to anything I summon. Even the most gentle of such spirits can harm a man."

"Enough of this." Perrick snapped. "I will admit it is the best hoax I've seen in a while, but hoax it is and Mr. Evans was no doubt a party to it. Obviously he is safely hidden in some secret chamber beneath this very floor."

"Mr. Perrick," Scriven said carefully. "I pride myself on being a reasonable man, and I trust what my own senses tell me. The gentleman vanished, there was no trick."

"He's right you know," said the thing in the circle. "I know where he is of course."

The thing proffered a leafy appendage, and opened its bunch of shoots to reveal the tiny figure of a man, a miniature of the journalist in every detail.

"Give him back." Brentwood demanded.

"Shan't." said the creature.

"I'm warning you"

The foliage shook with amusement. "Come and have a go, if you dare to cross your line," it taunted.

"This has gone far enough." Perrick stated. He could find no explanation for what he was seeing and the most irrational panic took hold of him.

"Poor Perrick," said the spirit. "You so want to be right, don't you? You want to step into the circle and prove you won't vanish."

"Leave it man," said Scriven, his voice strained with real fear.

"Oh don't mind him, he just doesn't want to see his friend exposed as a fraud," the spirit continued. "He's in on it too of course. They want to catch you out, the great debunker, debunked!"

Perrick took a step towards the circle. Brentwood stood frozen by a terrible fascination, unable to make himself intervene.

"Think of the good doctor's reputation, and as for that journalist, actually working with him – you can ruin the pair of them. Come into the circle. Prove I'm nothing but a hoax. Come into the circle, show them you won't vanish. Nothing will happen, I'll just be sticks and leaves and a bit of clockwork, I'll be a boy hidden in that cupboard there, watching through a crack in the wood, doing the voice. Come into the circle."

Perrick strode forwards with a confidence that belied the fear he felt. He stepped first onto one of the arcane symbols Brentwood had painted on the floor, then one to the rim of the circle. As he crossed over, he felt a cold tingle creeping over him, and leaned back at once. Then he saw a grey limb reach out, tendrils of plant coiling around his arm, pulling him in. He screamed as the foliage closed around him.

"Brentwood!" Scrivener's voice was stretched and quavering. The thing in the circle looked up at him.

"Didn't he tell you, old man?" it asked.

"Don't listen to it Adrian, whatever it says, don't listen to it." Brentwood began scrabbling together the tools of banishment.

"Can you really believe he didn't know this would happen?" The spirit asked. "He's no fool, you've known him long enough to know that. You thought you could trust him, but what has he done? Gathered a group of people so he can see what happens to them. He knew that fool Perrick would want to test me, would be unable to resist the temptation to enter the circle. He wanted to see what would happen. He was even prepared to risk your life. Some friend you have here Mr. Scriven."

Scriven shook visibly. "I don't believe you," he said. "You lured Perrick into the circle and now you are trying to make me do something equally foolish."

"Good Doctor Brentwood never married, did he?" the spirit said, conversationally.

Brentwood had started to sprinkle water and to recite the banishment ritual. He stumbled over the ancient phrases of Latin, and his voice quavered with panic.

"Of course if anything happened to you, I am sure he would take good care of that pretty wife of yours. They always were such good friends. Did you never wonder about that? How closely he examined her when she was ill? He's always liked touching her, and she faints so often that there's always a chance for him to loosen her corsets."

"You lie." Scriven roared, his face red with anger.

"Oh, but you've seen the way they smile at each other, and now he's lured you here, he's going to trick you. He wants her all to himself. Those lovely breasts of hers with their dark nipples, so sweet to the taste. He's tasted them aplenty, I can tell you, and more than that. He took his time seducing her, a little touch here, a look there, but he's so much younger than you, so much fitter and more virile. You've never been able to please her--but the good Doctor? She can't get enough of him. Any opportunity she gets, she's over here to enjoy his services."

"I don't believe you." Scriven repeated, as though saying the words would enable him to convince himself. He had never been entirely sure of his fair-faced young wife, and he could not deny that she and the Doctor had always seemed familiar. Too familiar, if he was going to be honest. The thought of anyone else using her charming body enraged him, but he was a man of breeding and he bit back his anger.

"That isn't a banishment ritual, that's a ritual that will free me from the circle and let me do whatever I please. Any moment now he will take that knife he's got there and slash across the circle, and out I come. I get your blood. They will mourn a year before they actually marry, but he'll be in her knickers again well before then, mark my words."

Scriven looked at the knife in Brentwood's hand, and back at the leafy creature in the circle.

"Edward?" his voice was questioning.

"It speaks nothing but deceit." Brentwood answered. "Let me banish it and we'll put this horrible incident behind us.

"Edward, put down the knife." Scriven moved a step towards him. "Just put it down, and let me leave and we'll say no more about it."

Brentwood stood between him and the door.

"Let him leave and he'll go straight to the police, and then what will you do?" the spirit asked.

"Edward?" Scriven's voice grew ever more uncertain. "Just let me go home Edward, I swear I won't mention this to another living soul."

"Go." Said Brentwood.

Scriven passed him at a trot, heading as rapidly as he could for the far end of the room and the door to safety. He heard a dreadful, cackling laugh behind him, and a voice cried out,

"Too slow you fool, I'll have you now."

Pain gripped Adrian Scriven as his heart stopped beating. He crumpled to the floor, expecting that at any moment the liberated monster would come to tear him apart. He died believing that his friend had finally betrayed him.

Brentwood dropped the knife and ran to his fallen friend. Death had come swiftly, and he wept bitterly, knowing that his medical skill could do nothing to revive the fallen man. Eyes burning with anger, he turned to face the bloodthirsty apparition he had summoned.

"Murdering harlot!" he said.

"I warned you. I said there would be consequences." The voice was husky, but unapologetic.

'There was no need, no need at all!"

"I make the rules," it said, stepping daintily out of the circle. Brentwood paled.

"Oh please, you didn't think any of that mumbo jumbo would hold me, surely?" The creature stretched and shook its head. "You did? Oh dear."

Brentwood backed towards the

door. It was only a couple of yards away.

"I do not want to be shared with any of your friends. I will not be displayed for their amusement, hear me?"

He nodded, mute.

"Do you understand me now?"

The doorknob rattled under his shaking hand. He tried to turn it but his sweaty palms gave him no grip.

She was changing, throwing off the glamour that had masked her true nature: A beautiful monster he had thought to keep to himself, one that he had believed he could master and possess. A full year ago, his long research into arcane arts had brought him a strange, alluring creature out of the ether. He had believed her to be his, summoned by his will and held by his power. For weeks it had been enough to watch her, but he had studied further, and dared to enter the circle where his fey enchantress lay bound.

Fascination became obsession. Her skin was flawlessly perfect and smooth to the touch, her mouth yielding and capable of tricks he had never before dreamed of. She knew more methods of pleasing him than the most expensive whores he had ever paid, and she had been his to command. Even the tempting flesh of fair Amelia Scriven seemed poor in comparison to this rich prize, although he had not stinted in keeping his friend's wife happy even so.

If he closed his eyes, he could remember the first flutterings of her cool and feather-light fingers on his body. She had seemed an angel then, she had become his demon.

"Touch Amelia Scriven again and I'll have your balls off before you can blink," she said, her tone sweet despite the menace of her words.

"I won't touch her, I swear it."

"Then she's safe enough."

He nodded. The shock of so much carnage and destruction had shaken him deeply and he struggled to think clearly.

"One step out of line, and Perrick's corpse will be back to accuse you. Understood? My rules now. No more circles and summoning. No more running to the press. We play my game now, yes?"

She came so close that Brentwood could smell the honeyed perfume of her body. She infected his senses, and despite all that she had done, he still desired her. With a cruel smile on her face, she reached out a long finger to stroke his face. He could think of nothing beyond that sensation.

When she stopped, his manhood ached and his eyes stung. He had to be closer with her, to taste her and sink his flesh deeply into hers. All Brentwood could think of involved a need to be smothered by her, to forget everything that had happened. He could lose himself in the silk of her long hair, in the velvet brush of her skin and the deep pools of her eyes. He could bury himself deep in her inviting body, pump away every bad though or feeling and rejoice in the bliss of a shuddering orgasm. Then he would lie tightly between her thighs and be rocked out of all consciousness. She was his opium, his drug and his destruction, and he reveled in it. In the depths of his most secret thoughts he acknowledged her as his madness and desire.

The creature seemed no more than a perfect girl now, softly human as she stepped from his circle, her expression impossibly innocent. She looked like a flower, and the scene he had witnessed seemed like a distant nightmare. It could not have been her, not his sweet girl. She pushed him down onto the floor and he went willingly, happy to be trapped beneath her creamy thighs as she tore away his clothing with long, sharp nails. She smelled of roses and decay. Her kisses almost biting, eating into his flesh as he rose for her, swiftly guided into her body. She was warm and soft, drawing him into her flesh, deeper and deeper, further down into the pleasurable darkness. He could feel her rocking against him, feel her hair brushing over his chest and her hands rake his shoulders.

"Mine now," she said, "All mine." And he could not resist her.

His final thought was the realization he would ever see outside the room again.

http://www.myspace.com/brynneth_n_colvin

LINES SCRIBBLED IN THE EARTH: ENTRY 23

Late September, 1921

As I sit here in this buried principality, delving into the self-projecting rock-book records of the ancients, it becomes increasingly difficult to tear myself away from these immersive, overwhelming experiences, in order to write them down...but I must, for surely this is my purpose, this is why I was trapped here by the cave-in which almost certainly killed most of those of the Pawnee Institute-Sanbourne Institute joint expedition.

Water and food are lasting better than expected, although I've lost a tremendous amount of weight in these last three weeks. This is certainly due to my hours upon hours spent immersed in the minds, the lives, the experiences of others. Sometimes these experiences are intensely in the first person; at other times, they are recorded as if by some invisible spy's view. As near as I can ascertain, they are recorded in the very electromagnetic field of the planet itself, and were drawn forth by the ancient geniuses who built this city and recorded in a crystalline form that can be "awakened" by the appropriate technology and commands. Still, I must eventually tear myself away with gasps of terror or delight, in order to eat, to drink, to rest in genuine sleep and dreams—although dreams are scant, since my waking life has become almost one continuous dream.

From the depths of the most distant human past, to the distorted vistas of what appears to be the ultimate future of the Earth, I have seen wonders, horrors, panoramas that confound and dazzle the mind. I've seen the age before the last Great Flood, and the ages before that, before other cataclysms which shook our planet and wiped out civilizations which make our own look like the work of imbeciles; I've seen the mammoth-hunters and the wars between the first Cro-Magnon and the brutes which preceded them; I've seen the cities of the nephilim stretching crooked-fingered spires as if they would scratch the eyes of God Himself in their arrogance, and the subterranean cities of the serpent-folk which were old when Valusia was young.

But it is the future—or what seems to be the future, although if time is truly one immeasurable circle, might it not also be the past?—that draws my mind, my eyes, all of my sense with both fear and fascination. I have not yet learned how to distinguish the labeling system of the crystalline records, but have randomly, upon several occasions, stumbled upon tales of what appears to be a far-distant age yet to be, upon a senile and savage planet that used to be our own.

So now I write down the first of these tales of several that I've uncovered, these tales of time when the nature of the Earth is utterly changed and strange. Hopefully, if this city and my bones are ever found by some valiant group of scientists or explorers, my notebooks will still be intact.

T. Monroe Peabody

Sometime in late September, 1921, by nearest reckoning


Wm Michael Mott
Temple of the Salamander

1.

When Tulruhk was a squalling babe, the wind beat across Old Ulmerhk like waves of whips, a thousand miles wide. Stretched between the ancient seabeds, Ulmerhk the Great Plateau, Ulmerhk the Continent rose like a blood-red dream-red in evening, red in dawn, catching the fading light of the sun that never reached into the deep chasms of the seabeds, the bottom-most canyons filled with poisonous brine. But the wind found its way, through every cleft and canyon of a dried planet, through the ancient cities which brooded like skulls along the continental edge, and which raised broken fingers down in the dead ocean basins as well; and the wind hummed and moaned along the saline surfaces in the deep black cracks, and the hidden, moist and deadly depths, remnants of evaporated seas, sloshed ever sluggishly before tug and shove.

When Tulruhk was a half-starved youth, the hot wind burned his flesh by day, and the cold blasts bit his flesh by night, as he roamed with his tribe among the plains of Tarlkesh, where the scaly nanioths dug perpetually at the earth with blind tusks, and the price of a meal was often a life. He learned to hunt, the way of the hunt, to track the burrel-ikes and nanioths, the shrumshrum dogs with heavy fangs, and to deal death to man and beast alike. Sword and spear, hatchet and axe, and the long collapsible kwaiin-lance, were his confidants; the bola was his friend, for its weights could fight the hungry wind, and it always flew true to the legs or neck of foe and prey. He knew nothing of arrow and bows, for the winds had made them obsolete a million years before, when the other continents of Urit were beaten into hills or into dusts, by the idiot spasms of an insane sun, and the distressed weather of its rage.

When Tulruhk was a young man with his scars, with the claw-marks of burrel-ikes and the curved etchings of needles on face, neck, and limbs, he fought the men and women of the other tribes, for all others were the enemies of his people. Tall and lean, but muscled with tight sinews of tremendous strength and bristling with weapons, he wandered the ruined cities which gaped silently as if screaming; he dug for old metal and baubles, but he was certain to be back into the wasteland by nightfall, lest he face outnumbered those things which called dead cities home. He fought the quaja-folk for non-poisonous salt, and took their horned heads as trophies. He traded his genes for Garnaskina ingots of imperishable metal, for the forging of his father's swords--a night of pleasure exchanged for a year's wealth, the strongest steel for leaving his seed with an enemy people. But he didn't care, for the world was dead, and everyone knew it was so.

When the crumpled moon rose over Old Ulmerhk, and one side of Urit fell to shivering, Tulruhk would hunt. Or he would climb a crag and shave his blond head and beard with a sharp dry blade, leaving only his topknot and the long moustaches which proclaimed his race. Sometimes he would sit under the cold, cold stars and wonder, about the places far from the plains of Tarlkesh, about the strangers glimpsed at a distance, meandering by in numbers large and small. He wondered about the wide footpath which stretched and looped across the plain, and which seemed to stretch everywhere when he looked from the highest ridges, in every direction. The road was gray, and of stone harder than any other substance, uneroded; but it

shimmered and seemed to sing silently of distant places and newer things. When the clan was sleeping, he would sometimes gather his weapons, his few possessions and water-bags, and start out walking along the road, under the fractured moonlight; but then he would stop after a short distance, for the road was a forbidden luxury to all the peoples of the plains. It always had been so. And it always would be, for Urit may have been dead, but the road was not.

It was to be crossed, but not used. It was to be avoided whenever possible. To sit on the road was to fall into a stealthy stupor and die; many an animal or half-wit had done so, to be slowly absorbed by the road, to feed its imperishable smoothness which never seemed to be covered by the sands or creeping grasses. It was alive, for it whispered at times, or seemed to, and would turn a mauve hue wherever it had recently fed. The deadliness of the road made it an enemy, ever-present and often encountered. Some non-humans worshipped the road, like the panderikes and joorls, and some human beings punished criminals and enemies by binding their limbs and laying them on it; but only strangers, not native to the plains, walked gray lengths. Surely they were sorcerers. The road was the tattoo of the world, more alive than the world, more alive than Ulmerhk, the Last Plateau of Mankind.

One day the sun rose like a roseate demon, a dusky red eye as on every other day. Tulruhk woke with a nagging memory, at first thought seeming a dream; but then he remembered the dim caravan of travelers he'd watched from afar the night before, jingling softly and moving by moonlight only, along the road and toward the east. He lay on his pallet wondering for a few minutes, then prepared for the day. Leaving the low hut, he went to the smithy of his father, to find the forge and anvils silent. His mother sat dry-eyed and haggard as bracken by the door to the sod-domed hut. He did not need to ask her what had happened; he went within, where the body of his father lay across the cold forge, the scent of burned flesh still heavy in the air.

The old man smiled a toothless, lifeless smile, gray hair sparse and scorched, dead of age and of wearying work. Tulruhk thanked him silently with a nod for all that he had been taught, and he took his birthright from the racks, the straight longsword and curved shortsword of unbreakable and untarnishable Garnaskina steel, the kwaiin-lance of many barbs and snares. These things his father had made, and had used, and had taught his son in their use. Tulruhk left his old weapons by the forge, girded his new ones well, and went out into the gritty morning. His mother was already gone, and he knew that she had sought the embrace of the wild-places of the desert. He would never see her again, as this was the custom of his people. He did not shed a tear, for water was precious; his belly did not knot or tumble, but he sighed. He would leave the lands of his people this day, for such was the custom as well-he was the last of his line, aocath, outcast, without wife, heirs or in-laws, and beyond the age of the last scarification. He was glad of this custom, for now he was free to roam against all taboos. He would leave the range of the Kiahnnash, his tribe and clan. The world was dead, but now he would live.

Scrawny children, tanned dark and light-haired, stared at him with hollow eyes as he passed. Already, men were moving toward the smithy to claim it for their own, and a feud or battle would surely result. Pigs rutted, dogs yapped, and somewhere a woman coughed the dust of the night from her lungs. Tulruhk of the Kiahnnash turned his back to the Kiahnnash, and set out for the East, pulling his cowl up and his leather hat down as he faced the senile sun. He would not walk the road, but he would parallel it, he would follow it, and it would take him to those places where the jingling and glinting strangers and travelers had come from, upon occasion or in his dreams.

For three days he traveled, living off the land. Late on the third day he bartered with three stridulating joorls for a handful of edible roots. The chitinous creatures gnashed their mandibles, but wisely let him pass without a fight. The fourth day was born like the rest.

The road curled away, like an etching on a sandstone tablet, to the dusky hills on the horizon. Tulruhk's keen violet eyes automatically scanned the way as he went, noting every dust-devil or plume, every motion of grass, weed, or the swaying, reed-like tenglis-cacti which grew in clumps here and there. He had left the protection of his clan, and now all other living things were potentially his enemies, or definitely were. The wind sang across the sand, and played the holes in the tenglis like pipes, a musical sound like a dim symphony of spirits. He walked all through the day, the sun rushing at first to meet him, then passing overhead, and finally glaring at his back with dull ferocity. Purple shadows stretched across the sandy dunes, which were red now, and before him loomed the Hills Scandid, a perilous region which marked the eastern border of the Plains of Tarlkesh. The dunes rose and narrowed inward simultaneously, a good place for an ambush. He knew such places well, as he had used them for such purposes himself, many times. The road continued onward, shooting through a narrow gap between two huge dunes, which looked like the splaying breasts of a supine giantess. Tulruhk stopped a quarter mile away, eyeing the deepening shadows of the hills. Somewhere, a shrumshrum cackled, then howled. He drew his longsword, and, compressed kwaiin-lance in his other hand, he decided to make a detour. He headed to the north, then east again, around the northward dune and on the opposite side of the road from the giant dog-beast he'd heard. Effortlessly and silently he trotted along in the sifting, sandy soil, ignoring the sting of brambles and thorns above his knee-high boots, bending down as he went, so as to create no silhouette against the sunset sky.

In very short time he was on the slope of the dune, contemplating his next move. He stood listening and smelling with the keen senses of a wild thing of the wastelands, his every nerve alert for danger. Shrumshrum were solitary beasts, but they sometimes met for mating or for purposes of fighting, and he wanted to avoid their venomous teeth if at all possible. The sun raced suddenly down, and the world fell into a deep gloom, not quite night but close enough. Blasts of wind out of the west threatened his eyes with stinging particles, so he turned away, looking back and downward occasionally. The moon had not yet begun to rise, and the hills loomed beyond the curve of the dune, a dark and ominous wall. Tulruhk, as much at home in the wilderness at night as he was by day, simply crouched and continued his vigil.

Soon he heard a faint sound over the rising wind, a sound which he recognized immediately as the cracking and crushing of bone. He eased up the slope toward the crest of the dune, toward the road some twenty feet below. He stopped short of looking over, waiting for moonrise and light. For an hour he sat and listened to the sound of a shrumshrum at feast, smelling its distinctive odor, acrid yet musty. It could not smell him, overwhelmed as it was in the odors of its feast. Slowly the moon rose, a ragged lump of a beacon in the east; Tulruhk crept up and looked over the crest of the sand-hill, and onto the road below. Shrumshrum often hunted along the road, moving along it but not coming to a dangerous halt or rest. The road was glowing softly-mauve, pink, and purple in places, where lumps of flesh were strewn about. At the opposite side a huge beast hunkered, not quite on the road but close to dinner, which was not so fortunate. The miscellaneous body-parts of several human beings were scattered about, blood and flesh already sinking into the road, which had turned spongy and receptive in places. The shrumshrum, a pale spotted beast of ocher color, was methodically ripping the ribs away from an upper torso, huge, blood-stained teeth gleaming in the moonlight. A man's head lolled; the shrumshrum took the skull in its mouth gingerly, then crushed it with an indolent, leisurely and effortless motion of its jaws. A look of satisfaction spread across its broad face.

Tulruhk's first impulse was to leave the canine at its feast, as the matter was none of his affair, and he had avoided both detection and attack. But the people were not of the plains; they were perhaps of the same party he had seen passing along the road in the night, prior to his journey's start.

Even by moonlight he could see how different they were, as a strangely pale arm lay here, a bluish-tinted chunk of torso lay there, and pieces of what looked like a dark brown person were even closer at hand. Stranger still where the garments and shreds of garments, with colorful and outlandish patterns which were not conducive to surviving inconspicuously in the wildlands. Cloth bags and metal objects were thrown about as well. He decided to back away slowly and quietly, and come back in a few hours when the beast had finished its meal-it had no need for the man-made things, and the road would not take them either. He eased backward silently.... And then he heard the moan.

He stopped, considering. These people were nothing to him, not kin or friend. If someone were still living, then that someone would not be so for long, for the road had probably already started the digestive process. Or it would only be a matter of minutes before the shrumshrum would stroll onto the road and playfully crush the wretch's skull. Tulruhk thought about that skull; was it a man or woman, or perhaps a child? What secrets and mysteries, what knowledge and experiences which he would never know were locked inside that suffering skull, about to be silenced forever? What wonders might the person impart before dying?

Before he even realized consciously what he was doing, the Kiahnnash was in motion. Sheathing his longsword in its sheath over his shoulder, he rose to a half-crouch, raising the flexible, unbreakable kwaiin-lance back and above-he snapped his arm like a striking serpent, fingers playing on the rods

and studs which controlled the lance. The shrumshrum looked up, confused and half-snarling; in one flurry of whirring movement, the cable from the end of the growing lance flashed downward, and two wicked barbs exploded into its huge, glowing eyes while the knife-noose fastened about its huge neck. It reared up on its hind legs, a head taller than a man, and Tulruhk dug his feet into the sand and dirt, locked his legs, and snapped his arm back. With a popping sound, the beast's head left its body, and both head and body fell with a meaty racket onto the bloody road. Spurting a fountain of gore, the huge, headless form half-rose again, and clawed its way across the bloody road before coming to a halt.

Tulruhk wasted no time contemplating the situation. With so much blood about, other predators would not be long in arriving. He slid down the steep slope and to the edge of the road, kicking the head of the beast contemptuously as he passed. He went directly to the first bag which lay nearby, and began going through it, also looking about for the source of the voice he had heard. The bag contained strange collections of pale, square leaves, bound together somehow between thicker, flatter squares; the leaves were covered with strange squiggles and marks. He snorted-useless garbage, perhaps tinder for starting fires, or ceremonial items. He cast the bag aside, and telescoped his lance with a snap and a flicker.

A shuddering moan rose again. He moved toward it quickly and found its maker. A man lay in the middle of the road, one leg apparently broken in several places; his other leg, arm, and half of his torso had already sunk into the devouring road, which looked like congealed pudding around him. Tulruhk did not get too near the softer areas, but slowly raised his hand in an unfamiliar act of greeting.

The man was dark brown in color, with green eyes which flashed even in the darkness. He was obviously in some pain, but not as much as he might have been without the somewhat sensation-deadening effect of the road. Slowly he noticed Tulruhk; he raised his head slightly, a half-digested ear dangling. He motioned feebly with his one intact hand.

Tulruhk shifted about on his feet, wary of the road. The man noticed his motion and nodded in understanding. With frothy lips, he spoke in a near-whisper, his language similar enough to comprehend.

"Bar...Barbarian. Where were you when we needed you?" He smiled and half-laughed, spitting blood. "You're of a savage race, to kill a monster like that....We should not have lingered behind the others. If they're waiting, they'll wait until the sun freezes. My bag....." He tried to look around, but could not control his head and neck. "Find my bag. Blue, with white diamonds. Take the contents for yourself....I give them to you, as a reward for avenging our deaths on that beast. Take them to the cities of the canyons, near Ulmerhk's edge.....There you will find a destiny worth having! Folk there will cower before a man like you. Trust no one, not even yourself! You have never left this steppe, have you...? I thought not, I see it in your eyes! Do not waste what I give you on some barbarian woman with hard flesh and pendulous breasts, or some tattooed chieftain! Leave this place, and seek your destiny elsewhere!"

Tulruhk's voice rumbled in low answer. "I'm leaving as it is....but I will look for this bag you mention. Who are you? What is your tribe? What is the name of your hunting-ground?"

The dying man ignored his questions. His voice was weaker, but filled with a stubborn rebellion against death. "By the Twelve-headed Effigy of Yoridd, I hurt! Go now, before you too are taken by some beast or other! Stay away from the cavernous places, and only enter the forests and gourdgroves by daylight! Drink no water that is not filtered by rock, by white gravels! Linger not where graven images lurk, and avoid the dead cities beyond the hills! Go to Nosberoigne, blue-domed above the empty ocean's depths! Take the bag to the White Tower, and knock upon the brazen entry of the Red Sign. Then will you know what you have been seeking all your life-What we all are seeking! Remember the path is of the heart....Now go. I'm dying, feeding the road which has shown me many years of wonders! Go, barbarian, and bow to no man of civilized lands! They are not your equal, not one; the fire in your eyes is greater than all their wills combined. I watched you dispatch the dog.... Never have I seen....such...."

With a wheezing rattle, he died. Glassy-eyed he stared. Under the wind, the road was crackling, whispering. Tulruhk looked about quickly, and located the bag some twenty yards away. It was ringed and strapped, as small as the thin bedroll which was fastened to his baldric, at the small of his back. He flipped the catch and eyed the contents in the gloom-a jumble of smooth shapes, curved and notched, of a hard smooth substance he had never before seen. He closed it, and fastened it to the catches which dangled at the back of baldric and swordbelt, then clambered back up the dune the way he had come, disdaining to stop long enough to cut a steak from the shrumshrum dog. He would camp in the hills, in a defensible rock-ledge he knew from tribal lore, which would be surrounded by the pulpy, foul-tasting, but water-rich cacti-bulbs and lumpy lichens which often kept savage folk alive. The winds were beating up the sand, and phantasms seemed to dance; he pulled his cowl up, tightened the collar of his leathern jerkin, and hurried on toward a place of rest.

An hour later he sat beneath a rock ceiling, in a defensible cranny out of the wind and with a small fire blazing. He made a quick meal of cacti-bulbs, dog-meat, and an unfortunate rodent, which he'd taken with his bolas. After this quick repast, he examined the contents of the bag, at first bemused; soon he realized that the pieces were a puzzle of sorts, which could be locked together to form an object. He toyed with it for a few minutes, until the last piece snapped into place. Covered or embedded with small, angular metallic shapes, the smooth, ivory-looking object was undeniably a rounded representation of a human or mammalian organ. It was an exact replica of a heart, as large as his fist.

He remembered the brown man's dying words. Placing the pieced-together object back in the bag, he used it for a pillow and went to sleep, his short-sword in his lap.

2.

The day came up to meet him, already risen. Dawn flashed pink fingers across the hills, and the crags glowed like gold. Tulruhk met the red dawn with his purple-tinged gaze, then turned to seek out the road once more, thrusting his rumpled hat beneath his belt. Soon he found the highway, winding and rolling through passes and gaps. He knew by the increasingly craggy terrain that he would be forced to travel on the road itself, if he did not want to lose it. For a moment he wavered in his resolve to follow the living highway; but then he plunged ahead, concerned only of ambush or predators, or of meeting an overwhelming force or pack of animals on the road. By mid-day, he smelled smoke; shortly afterward, he glimpsed the twisting gray-brown spiral of it as he would come to bendings or turns which provided a clear view of the eastern sky. He had already progressed farther from the free and open plain than any of his race had come for a thousand years; or if they had come this way, they never returned to tell the tale. He moved ever alertly, for a large quantity of visible smoke was a sign of a settlement, trouble, or stupidity. He kept a steady pace, not allowing the road to become familiar enough to even attempt a nibble at his uneasy feet.

Near evening he slipped down into a long, low valley, deep in shadows. Despite his superstitious concerns about the road, he paused to observe an unfamiliar sight. The road shot straight as a kwaiin-cast through the vale, which was some three or more miles in length, and around two miles across. Further down, dark pillar-like shapes lined the living highway. But this unaccustomed uniformity of the road was not what surprised him- the valley floor was green, covered in lumpy and branching vegetation, some of it considerably higher than his head! He had never before seen such foliage, such large plant-forms, but he had heard stories about an ancient time when such places were more common. Apparently the savage winds which scraped much of the world couldn't penetrate with full force into this place, and it had remained undamaged, for thousands, or even millions of years. Amazed, he stepped off the road and into a deep, soft green grass, the like of which he had never seen. A low pall of smoke still hung in the air at the opposite end of the valley.

How could his people, and the other tribes, have lived so close to such a luxuriant place, and never have known of its existence? Ancient taboos kept them to the high plains, but he was nevertheless astonished. Fear of the path he'd taken, the road, had no doubt kept them from this place; if any had wandered the craggy hills, they might never have found it otherwise. A crashing sound in the forest made him draw the shortsword at his hip; he gazed in wonder at the huge and ancient trees, unsure if they were grass or cacti. The moon was rising earlier tonight, and was already illuminating much of the valley, and the trees were still in the windless air. Not even a breeze stirred the grass.

Warily he set off, looking for a secure place to make camp. He paralleled the road, staying close to the treeline, and soon he came upon horrific statues, hewn of purple and red chalcedony, in the likeness of squatting, standing, and gaping amphibian creatures. Twelve feet high, they lined the road on either side, like great toads and newts of humanoid aspect. The sheer ravenous hunger and lust of their expressions made him wince in disgust. In his culture, such things

were not only not made, they were despised. They leered at him in the moonlight as he went from the shadow of one to the shadow of the next.

Ahead, dark heaps of stone jutted above the treetops on both sides of the road. From here a hint of smoke still came, and now the odor of burning flesh offended his nostrils, yet set his stomach to quivering in hunger. The valley was utterly silent, without a single insect or bird disturbing the stillness. Tulruhk neared the ruins. Even at a distance, he could see that strange forms similar to the statues along the road decorated the levels and parapets, or grinned evilly along the rooftops. Sword in hand, he moved cautiously toward the nearest heap of stone which he could see through the trees, slipping between the boles and ducking low-hanging branches. Lichens quivered slightly at the breeze of his passing, and he glanced in wonder at great, nodding blossoms of red and purple, which almost looked to be made of the same stone as the idols along the highway. A sickeningly-sweet perfume emanated from them and hung heavy in the air.

He came to an ancient pavement of purplish stone. Mosses and lichens had all but covered the path, and now something rattled in the underbrush. He froze in place, eyes narrowed and questing for the source, and then he saw it. A small yellowish patch of something, flat yet composed of pulpy cilia, was dragging itself across the path. He poked at it with his shortsword, and it puckered up silently around his blade, writhing slowly. Disgusted, he flicked it into the brush and moved on.

Soon an ancient edifice rose before him. The trees seemed to sway back from the building all around, as if their growth had been affected by revulsion or fright. Twisting, interlocked figures decorated the pitted surface, faces leered, obscene and bestial acts were frozen in stone. The doorway was a looming hole, a great arched rectangle of gloom. As he neared this entrance, he noticed more of the crawling fungi or lichen which he'd seen on the path, moving here and there over the walls themselves. His instincts tingled and it seemed as if he sensed unseen eyes upon him, raking his flesh like coals.

A cracking and crashing in the forest behind him provided the impetus to move. He ducked within the structure and stood back in the shadows, staring at the darkness under the trees. Something large was moving about through the wood, breaking limbs and twigs. Suddenly a gigantic paleness flowed from the trees and into view, and he held his breath lest it find him.

Thirty yards wide it stretched, and perhaps twice as long. Cilia the size of fingers wriggled along every surface, and it dug at the ground as it went, flowing like a living mudslide. It wriggled along, half in the forest and half out, clinging to ground and tree-trunks alike, and Tulruhk had no doubt that it devoured every living creature it encountered in soil and loam, sifting and feeding as it went. Smaller patches of yellow fled its mass, like soldier ants leaving the colony to forage, and others joined it. It moved at the speed of a brisk walk, send out a pseudopod toward the doorway, then withdrew it as the larger mass swept back into the wood once again.

He exhaled his pent breath with relief. This thing was no doubt the

source of the noise he'd heard upon first entering the valley. It may have been following his scent all along, but for now it had lost the trail. But it surely had not built a fire, nor cooked flesh. He turned to examine his surroundings.

He stood in an atrium of sorts, with polished stone walls and floors. Unlit torches, coated in cobwebs, jutted from sconces in the walls. The place was devoid of the little crawling things which roamed outside. Tulruhk sheathed his sword and taking his fire-kit from a pouch, soon had a torch blazing and in hand. Shadows danced eerily in the room. He headed for a nearby stair, which led obviously upward, and perhaps to a more-defensible place.

Warily he started up the stair-

Steel gleamed in the moonlight. Deftly he dodged the downswept knife, and knocked the arm aside with the wooden length of the torch. His hand shot into the shadows and met with soft, yet firm flesh. An upper arm in his hand, he yanked his assailant into the light.

She was young, clad in outland garb. Black hair tumbled to her shoulders, and her golden-brown hue reminded him of dawn over the plains. Her green eyes flashed in rage as she pulled against him. Grinning, he held her for a few more seconds, admiring the fullness of her heaving bosom and the pouting snarl upon her lips. Suddenly he released her, and she tumbled back to land on her backside on the stair.

"Dog! Plague-eaten barbarian dog! How dare you touch me so?" She rubbed her arm with one hand, glancing at the knife which now lay on the floor. In both garb and speech she was culturally similar to the man he'd encountered the night before. As if reading his mind, her eyes fell upon the bag which could be glimpsed at the back of his hip.

"Where did get that?" She half-rose as if to grab for the packet. He raised an admonishing brow, still admiring her look and her spirit.

"A man on the road gave it to me," he replied. "He fed the road, but before he died he told me to take it to a place called Nosbyeroi-"

"Nosberoigne," she corrected him. She looked at him with even deeper suspicion. "You say he gave it to you, eh? What happened to him? Who are you? What brings you to the Valley of the Salamander?"

He continued to gaze at her with an honest, uncivilized appreciation. "He and his companions were attacked by a shrumshrum dog on the road. It feasted on their guts and bones. He was still alive when I found him, but the road was already finishing him. We spoke, and he gave me the bag and that which it contains. As for me, I am called Tulruhk. Tulruhk of the Kiahnnash. I'm a wanderer, and as you say, a barbarian."

"What happened to the dog? How did you escape its belly?"

He shrugged. "I killed it."

Now her gaze was tempered with admiration as she looked him up and down. "I believe you. And now you follow the road, as my uncle instructed?"

"Yes, but not due to your uncle's command. I already followed it for reasons of my own. I am without clan. I'm as homeless and as free to wander as I ever dreamed of being."

Anger and fear left her face and she smiled. She looked at him appraisingly. Again he was stunned by her beauty. "If my uncle trusted you, even as he finally paid the toll, then I suppose I will trust you, too. So you have felt the call of the road? Carry the heart to the Tower of the Red Sign, as it's an honor to be chosen to do so. Tell me, Tulruhk of the Kiahnnash, would you have company along the long journey to Nosberoigne?" Her scent, strangely spiced, stirred his blood. "Aye. We will go together. But first, we must survive the night. A demonic thing roams the valley, under the moon."

She nodded. "I am Tandith, of Tinction-On-The-Sea. Come with me! I've been hiding since last night. Everyone else in my band is dead. The only reason I'm still here is because I've been waiting for my uncle and his men, and they obviously are not coming." She frowned, and bent to retrieve her knife. He didn't stop her, so she sheathed it and took his hand. "Come! There are more evils in this place than you realize." Taking the lead with the torch aloft, Tulruhk started up the stair. They came to a long gallery, where perverse statues leaned from niches. Dark chambers opened up to both sides. Tandith showed him to an alcove, the entrance covered by a moldering tapestry. Dust and the scent of great age hung in the air. She lowered the tapestry into place once more.

The room was small, with a slit of a window providing a view of the treetops outside. The moonlight glimmered upon the topmost bunches of leaves. The night without was silent. Tulruhk lit a second torch in a wall-sconce, then set his torch in another, while Tandith pulled a thick drape over the window. Then she related her tale.

Her people were of the land of Yiombruth, an ancient nation along the eastern edge of the continent of Ulmerhk. She spun a tale for Tulruhk which raised his wanderlust to new heights, a tale of a nation of scholars and explorers, of chroniclers and scientists, who roamed the dying Urit in a quest for knowledge and salvation, mapping the branchings and turnings of the road. She told him of the travels of her family and others along the living road, which she indicated had been created by man long ago, as a living servant to cover the world and provide smooth passage for magical floating vehicles which no longer existed. She spoke of the distant nations of the world, of wars and wonders, sorceries and terrors, and fortunes lost and found, and she spun a tale of sadness and longing, of desperate quests and the end of her family line. For with her uncle's passing, she was as alone as Tulruhk himself. She told him of the lamed man who had caused the dividing of her group from that of her uncle, and of the terrors they had encountered in the valley the night before, strange black-robed figures with wicked blades who slew silently and swiftly. Her eyes filled with tears as she finished:

"I crept out of that place, I know not how! There was a pit filled with dim red fire, the smell of blood and smoke mixed, and strange chanting which hurt my head, and then I saw....I think I saw....." She shook her head.

"Evil is ancient on old Urit. Things which were here before man's million-year rule have come to ascendancy again, in some places. I think this place was a human place, once, but it isn't any longer. The people have been changed by their.... habits. I escaped them, stumbled through the forest, until finally I found this place-this room. I have

been here ever since, for by night and day alike I've seen the robed ones moving under the trees, looking for me. I saw you come out of the forest, and thought you one of them, without the robes-I watched you enter, and I saw the giant lichen-thing which was following you. I think they fear that thing, for I haven't seen them for hours. I crept down to spy on you, perhaps to kill you before you could recapture me...."

She shuddered and lowered her eyes. He brushed the hair gently from her face with a callused hand, and she leaned close. They shared their warmth and their breath, learning more of each other without words, and Tulruhk realized that he had indeed found a place to pass the night.

3.

Tulruhk slept a deep and leaden sleep. Suddenly he was shaken awake by a slender hand, and half-bolted up, sword already leaving the scabbard-to recognize the woman Tandith beside him. She had been sitting watch, and he realized that she must be waking him for his turn....

The torches had burned low. Her brows raised in fright, she raised a finger to her lips and whispered.

"Sssht! I think the robed ones are in the building. Someone moves outside, also!"

Nodding, he rose and drew both long and short swords. He blew out one dying torch, but left the other burning low and red. Going to the window, he pulled the drape back with one finger and peered out at the valley. Tandith squeezed to his side and looked over his shoulder, her dagger in her hand.

The moon was not in sight but was to the west, behind them. Light was dim in the forest below, but even in that dimness, the plainsman and the woman could see furtive figures in the forest below, slinking about in small groups. Tulruhk instinctively knew that dawn was no more than two or three hours away. He dropped the cloth and turned to Tandith.

"We've got to get out of here. I'm not afraid of a fight, but it looks like thirty or more people down there. If they're in the building, then that means more. We've still got a mile or more to go once we reach the road, in order to get out of this place. I can probably outrun them, but...."

"I can't," she agreed. "But listen. When we were first attacked and taken, we were setting up camp. Our fleet-beasts were tied on the other side of the road from here, near a tall, conical tower. We had four horses, and a garrolak for burdens. If they are still there....."

"Then we ride. I haven't ridden a horse for years, as we tend to eat them where I come from. But I've done it before. We'll have to sneak out of the building and enter the place of the big-plants-"

"Trees. They're called trees, a group is a forest."

"Enter the forest, then, without being seen. If they see us, you take the lead and I'll follow, defending our backs. Head for the place where the horses are tethered."

She nodded and they moved to the door. Listening for several seconds, they heard a distant patter like footsteps elsewhere in the immense structure, echoing hollowly, but were unable to tell how far away the sound originated, or if it were above, below, or on the same level. With his longsword he pushed the tapestry aside and they exited the alcove, abandoning the torch which would betray their position. The gallery was silent, empty, and nearly black. They set off toward the stair.

As they neared the stair, they heard someone ascending. They slid into one of the niches which housed a warty, newt-headed deity. No sooner had they done so than three figures glided almost silently into the gallery from the level below, passing within inches of their hiding-place.

Tulruhk could not see their features very well, but they looked human enough. For some reason he thought that at least one of them was female, perhaps due to her gait. Steel glinted in their hands as they passed, and within a minute the gallery was clear again. Wasting no time, the barbarian took the lead and headed down the stairwell, the woman close behind.

As they entered the atrium, they were met by three more figures, brandishing long, thin dirks. The scuff of their feet and the rustling of their hooded robes were their only sounds. Without a word or battle-cry, Tulruhk was among them, steel flashing in each hand. He parried a jab to his abdomen, and blood leapt and glistened in arching spurts. They gurgled as they died. One of them, still alive, crawled toward the door, and Tandith buried her dagger in his back. He died with a strange hissing breath.

They hung back from the entrance, peering outside. Now the forest seemed still and silent. Above them in the building, others were moving about. Tulruhk leaned forward and scanned the dark yard, deep in shadow. Motioning to Tandith, he set off at a trot for the forest some forty yards away, and she followed closely.

Without warning, two dark figures leapt up out of the brush at the forest's edge. Leaning back to avoid a thrust from a long dirk, Tulruhk lashed out with the longsword and felt vertebrae give way before its razor-edge; his foot crushed the ribs of the other attacker, who was still strangely silent, and the Kiahnnashi brought both of his blades, one curved, one straight, together in a decapitating maneuver of the high-plains swordsmen. The man's head, strangely elongated of crown and jaw, fell the left as his body fell right. Tandith stared at her companion with a mixture of fear and fascination, and he motioned toward the forest with a nod.

"Let's go, let's go! We made some noise that time," he grumbled. She plunged ahead of him and they set off through the wood, ignoring the paved path. Quickly they crept and slipped along, aware now of movement about them, but unsure of its cause. The trees thinned ahead, and the road gleamed like a gray ribbon in the dying moonlight. Tulruhk thrust one long arm in front of her to keep her from plunging in a panic for the road.

"Wait!" he whispered. "Look!"

Several figures were moving down the road, toward the ruins further to the east. They were leading four protesting horses and a flat-horned garrolak by the reins. Tandith stamped her foot in fury.

"Damn!" she whispered vehemently. "By the Owl-headed Deity of Chuz, we are surely accursed! Now we will never leave this place!"

"The hell we won't," Tulruhk replied from between gritted teeth. "I'm following the horses. They'll never expect us to trail them to their own lair!"

Tearing a large flat leaf from a bush, he wiped the blood from his shortsword and sheathed it. He unclipped the kwaiin-lance from his belt and set off stealthily following the group, running from the cover of one road-lining idol to another. Shaking her head, Tandith followed.

The group, about fifteen in number, stayed on the road for about two-hundred yards before veering off and to the south. A grove of trees, laid out like the walls of a passageway, enveloped them, and the beasts they led into deeper darkness. Tulruhk and Tandith crouched together behind a statue, scanning the scene. Stillness reigned in all directions. A large, conical mass loomed above the treetops beyond the tree-lined path, at least eighty feet high. As if of mutual accord, the man and woman rose and ran across the pliant road, bent double to lower their likelihood of being discovered. They kept this position until they reached the tree-lined way, and passed beneath its boughs.

Soon they came to a broadening of the trail. Ahead a clearing loomed, and beyond that a massive artificial mountain. Tulruhk was shocked by its size, as it dwarfed the building they'd left. It was in the form of a great, coiling thing, made from huge blocks of perfectly-fitted, bluish stone; and even though the moon was sinking below the hills, they could see that the titanic, flat head of a monstrous salamander hung down from the top of the mass, to meet the ground. wide, gaping mouth was a red-glowing portal. No robed and hooded figures were in sight; apparently they were all either searching for the girl, or were within this horrific structure.

Tandith's eyes were wide with fear. "You see-Vokunthaggos of the Gills! My uncle was right! This is the Vale of the Salamander...."

Somewhere within, a gong sounded. It reverberated and rolled in sonorous echoes within the coils of the building, and magnified, poured out into the surrounding valley, echoing from the hills. Tulruhk nudged her forward with his elbow.

"Let's go-I think that's the dinner-call. We'll be surrounded soon if we stay here. I'd rather die fighting for a chance to survive, than with a dirk in my back!" He set off at a run as she hastened to keep up, and they plunged within the maw of the Salamander.

The entranceway was curved like a gullet, of a pale pink stone which reflected the light of braziers along the walls. The floor below was inlaid with tiles of a similar stone, fashioned to resemble a wide pink tongue. No one was about, but ahead of them a strange muttering sound was heard, rolling like thunder, or like the ghostly waves of extinct seas. A large inner portal opened upon a vaster, darker hollowness-stopping short of silhouetting themselves against the light of the tunnel, they took a smaller side path which led to a stair, which they ascended.

Now they were low on their haunches, moving furtively on a great balcony which ran around the

entirety of the central chamber. The latter was a huge, cavernous amphitheatre, far ends lost in gloom. Below them twenty or so figures swarmed; a round, central stage was surrounded by more of the hideous statuary, facing outward. In the center of this elevated area, a stone-lined well or pit plunged into subterranean depths, one flaming brazier before it. A circular fire-pit, unbroken except by one ramp-like bridge, surrounded the entire central structure like a red-glowing moat, and on this, metal racks held the still-smoldering remains of Tandith's travelling-companions. Tulruhk growled low in disgust.

The horses and the garrolak were being led up the ramp to the platform. Each was tethered to a different idol, leaving three of the eight statues without an apparent sacrifice. Tulruhk glared at the scene below with bushy blonde brows knotted. The idols seemed to take on a hideous life in the firelight, almost looking as if they swayed and breathed in the flickering madness. Tandith pointed at them.

"See, Garadon the Insatiable! The tusked one, there, with multiple eyes! And there is old Yaiaki, the faceless toad-god of Yemeth! Krond the Merciless squats beside him, his maleness apparent! All are the lieutenants of Volkunthaggos the Salamander-God-such abominable entities are only worshipped in the darkest places of Urit, Tulruhk! I don't see how we can get to the horses now!"

Tulruhk surveyed the situation. "How did you escape this place? Show me!" She pointed to a group of robed, hooded figures, preparing a cauldron of bubbling matter over the coals. More were streaming into the chamber now, and all were chanting lowly in an unknown tongue. "There! They drank that stuff, and made us drink it as well! Except I spat my share out when they weren't looking. They lowered me toward the grill, and I cut my ropes on a jagged piece of iron. There's a hole under the ramp, and I slid beneath and into a small tunnel which leads to the outside! I didn't stay long enough to watch the entire ceremony-the dark old gods are without mercy! We should flee while we can!"

"I fear not these animal-headed idols," Tulruhk growled. "My people worship the One Nameless who dwells in the Great Stillness, and Him alone do we fear. The only thing I'm concerned about right now is being outnumbered while on foot!" He ducked lower. "I'll wait a while longer and look for a chance-you can make your try on foot, if you wish."

"Barbarian fool! I should leave you here in this kitchen of hell! But I'll wait, since I've never seen a barbarian die in battle!"

"Look-something's happening!" He whispered. Down below, the figures had finished tethering the animals, and now were lining up to receive a portion of the foul-looking brew in wooden cups. They quaffed as they went, and formed a semi-circle in front of the altar, chanting as they did so. At least thirty people were participating, now. The air seemed to flicker and waver strangely. Tulruhk wiped his eyes with his forearm. The atmosphere continued to weirdly warp and flow, as one figure stepped forth and ascended the ramp.

The robe was dropped. Tulruhk gaped, and Tandith gasped. A woman of unearthly beauty, pale skin like alabaster gleaming with sweat, stood nude on the stage. Her hair and eyes were the color of night,

her lips full and ripe as the great purple-red blossoms growing in the forest outside. Dipping a dagger in the flames of the brazier, she raised her hands, breasts uplifted, and began to sing in an ululating wail of lust and abandon.

The crowd before her fell into a frenzy, a mass seizure of twisting, cavorting passion.

The fires seemed to glow with a twisting, hypnotic brilliance. Shadows swayed strangely as if dancing to her song. She sang louder, her voice an unnatural and alluring echo of pain, of longing and of despair. The air around her seemed to swirl, and Tulruhk's mind was filled with strange images at the sound of it, images of a past so long gone as to be less than a dream-visions of horrific reptilian and amphibian forms building cities beneath a smooth and unscarred moon, of swamps and oceans of unimaginable depth and vastness, swarming with scaled or slimy life. The images seemed to fill not only his head, but the chamber itself. Men who were lizards rode giant horned beasts beneath a golden sky; metal ships like dragonflies ascended to the heavens, or back to Urit, dodging flying things with leathery wings.

Centuries rolled like seconds, the aeons turned; the world was covered with a strange and fierce empire, savage yet more advanced than any which would ever come of man. Reptilian men and women sacrificed hairy humanoid things on gory altars, and fought battles in deep caverns, or in a deep, wet murkiness. Then came images of larger wars, of great rocky spheres in a black void, and a hurtling object striking the world-then only blackness, freezing and bitter. Slowly, light gleamed in Tulruhk's head, and he saw the first true humans arise in a garden-like world, a world as lush as the valley outside. He saw them build, grow in knowledge, make cities and farms, and he saw them hunting their ancient enemies, the scaly and aquatic races which had preceded them in time, the races which moved out of underground lairs by night to prey on the flesh of mankind. Battles rang out silently yet with strident emotive power; heroes pursued scaled things, slinking things, into subterranean lairs, and brought them down to death. It was a powerful enough tale to lose oneself in-Tulruhk glanced at Tandith, and her face revealed that she, too, was seeing the sorcerous forms conjured by the witch's song.

He nudged her sharply with one big elbow, and she snapped back to the present. A narcotic scent hung heavy in the air, part of the smoke generated below. He motioned at the crowd below, and she followed his gaze. Now the priestess moved toward the heavy garrolak, which snorted and milled about in terror. Her song changed to a strident chant as she raised a long knife, and the crowd fell into a fit, thrashing and writhing on the floor. She slashed the flesh of the dray-beast, bringing blood but causing no fatal wounds. Behind her, something vile was rising from the circular pit....

Like the vomit of hell, the pale carpet-beast of the forest flowed forth, disdaining the woman and engulfing the bellowing garrolak. Like a walking cheese, the coated creature staggered about, and the thing which coated it flushed first pink, then deep red. It oozed away, leaving behind a heap of bare bones, and began to climb the idol of faceless Yaiaki, coating the smooth, cold stone in like fashion. The priestess went into a paroxysm of leaping and chanting, her abundant charms quivering, and the crawling

horror grew pale again, falling in sludgy waves to the stage once more. Slowly, it sent out a pseudopod, and grasped the nearest rearing horse about a hind leg-but this was not the worst of the ceremony.

Tulruhk cursed and prayed in the same muttered breath. The idol of Yaiaki, somehow softer, more fleshly, *moved*.

Tandith gasped, stifling a squeal of terror. The idol, about fifteen feet in height, rose upon unsteady and misshapen legs. The skin flushed red, then brown, then greenish-black. Swaying slightly, Yaiaki rose to accept the adoration of his worshippers.

The crawling carpet had already engulfed the horse, which thrashed a great deal more than had the garrolak. The steed seemed to be putting up a mighty, screaming fight, but the outcome was inevitable. Tulruhk slid back, and Tandith looked at him in amazement.

"Where are you going? Are you mad?"

"They're all drunk or insane. Two pieces of demon-dung are better odds to face than six-there are four more sacrifices, meaning four more idols to deal with, remember? Wait for me on the road, I'm going to get us a horse!" They ran down the curved stairwell. Tandith took his arm and, much to his surprise, kissed him. "May all the gods of mankind speed you, you barbarian oaf! Look for me on the road, I'll be heading out of this damned valley!"

"I know not your gods," he replied, "but the Nameless One may guide my blade. Or I'll die. Either way, I'll buy you some time! Now go!"

She turned and ran. He snapped his kwaiin-lance out with one motion, and longsword in hand, charged into the insane chamber at the end of the hall. He made no sound as he sped over the prostrate, twitching worshippers; before him stood the gigantic figure of Yaiaki, half-turned away. Suddenly lips parted in its previously featureless face, and a long white tongue shot out, to scoop up one of the robed imbeciles on the floor below.

Tulruhk flew up the steps, sword in hand. Yaiaki noticed him and started to turn, and with a savage slash, he cut the monster's hamstring. The toad-god began to totter. The plainsman lashed the monster with his barbed kwaiin, and clear ichor spurted.

The priestess came at him now, knife upraised, breasts and torso covered in sweat and the blood of beasts. He looked into her eyes--

Suddenly the visions filled his head, overwhelming and filled with pain. He did not see the knife descending, but lashed out blindly--

The visions vanished in a red haze as she fell. Only seconds had passed. Shaking the cobwebs from his vision, he raced around to the opposite side of the well from the crawling horror, and vaulted bareback onto the nearest horse, cutting tether in the same leap, as he snapped his lance back into foot-long form. The cilia-covered terror was falling from another stone figure, and another nightmare was coming to life. Guiding the horse with his knees, Tulruhk wheeled the beast and they took off, taking the fiery moat in one leap. Yaiaki swept a giant, knobby hand at them as they fled, but missed-overextended and off-balance, the Faceless One fell like a toppling monolith onto the thrashing

bodies of his own worshippers, his giant webbed feet going into the fires.

A honking bellow filled the hall. Apparently, Yaiaki could feel pain. For an instant, Tulruhk wondered if the crippled monstrosity screamed with his invisible mouth, or his ass. The horse headed for the lighted hallway, and the fresh air outside. Tulruhk chanced one last look backward, before the scene was lost from view--

The pale, crawling life-form was attempting to engulf the flailing Yaiaki, who was in turn tearing it into pulpy bits. Worshippers had begun to come to, and were running around with screams of terror, as they were crushed or maimed by the battling abominations. Hoods had fallen, and all of the pale worshippers were strange of countenance, human-like yet not quite human. Behind them, a giant, newt-like thing was rising now from the altar-stage, alive and looking for a feast. It grinned a gaping, toothless grin and slithered down the ramp and into the melee--

Man and horse burst out into a darkness where the odor of dawn hung in the air. The terrified horse fled full-speed down the tree-lined trail, and he let it, clipping his kwaiin-lance back to his swordbelt as he rode. As they neared the road, he pulled back firmly yet gently on wild mane, slowing it to a canter, and sheathed his longsword in his back-scabbard. He rode alongside the road and toward the hills, which already glowed at the summits with a hint of day. A quarter-mile up the road, a disheveled Tandith held up her arms and he slowed to a trot, bending and sweeping her up with one arm. She covered his face with kisses.

"Damn!" he thundered. "I like you outland women! You make no secret of your feelings!"

She wrapped one arm around him, gripping the horse's neck with her other hand. "Come with me to Tinction-On-The-Sea, barbarian! I'll show you the mist-tides rolling across the ocean basin...."

She pressed against his chest and offered him her mouth, filling his senses. Keeping one eye open, Tulruhk kept the horse on the road, which rose to meet the first filtering light of dawn trickling through the pass above. Urit may be dead or dying, but it was good to be alive after all, and new, strange lands awaited him beyond the hills and across old Ulmerhk, along the ways of the road! He would go to Nosberoigne, and see what destiny had tossed his way! But as day broke, he sought to erase one memory from his mind, to lose it in her eager kisses, a recollection he knew he would never forget--the image of the crumpled Priestess of the Salamander, beheaded at one stroke.

No, he would never forget. For when he'd clawed free from her spell, he'd seen not the wondrously-beautiful form of a voluptuous woman lying at his feet--but the body of a great, gray amphibian, gills still twitching on a headless neck.

The dawn welcomed them into morning passes, and the road hummed beneath pounding hooves.

THE END

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THE FORGOTTEN CITIES OF CENTRAL AMERICA

by CRAIG GUGGOLZ



For two years, I have explored ancient sites in locations known only to a handful of people who are not residents of certain villages of Honduras and Belize. Through personal and private contacts, I have had been allowed a unique opportunity to see hidden relics left behind by a long passed civilization. Exclusively in the pages of this magazine do I share my explorations with you.

When my wife and I began looking for real estate in Central America, I never would have imagined that hidden beneath our feet, deep in the jungles, was a vast metropolis. I shared my interest in the lost civilizations of the Americas with locals in Belize and, due to the rapport and trust I established with them, I was taken to a hidden entrance of a forgotten pyramid buried beneath the foliage. Crawling through a tight gap, I slipped down into a cavern system that led to a burial chamber where I personally observed and inspected personal effects and funerary items placed unknown centuries before my astonished arrival. This initiatory expedition ignited an intense desire to see and uncover more of the vast city that once thrived throughout Central America.

Most recently, I investigated a site near the town of Colorado, Honduras. Having been told of a giant stone 'monkey head' in the jungle ruins, I set out to see this relic for myself. My wife and I met up with our German guides, Udo and Sylvia, who led us by horseback into the tropical wilderness. They were originally reluctant to take this trek, warning that it was a full day's ride to the site, made difficult by mud and steep mountains, and a narrow trail along treacherous cliffs, but I was determined. I sooon learned that they did not exaggerate. The trail was narrowest along the cliff face, with dangerous hairpin turns. To make matters worse, rain drizzled down upon us, making the trail more difficult for the horses. If that weren't enough, we then had to cross a river. In spite of the slippery rocks, we all made it to the other side, one at a time. At last, we were entering our hidden destination.







There lay before us the remnants of a Mayan city covered by foliage and grass. Sixty-three mounds, in total, we saw grave robber holes where locals who know of the site had sacked a few burial chambers. It is a common thing for the locals citizens to come and go here, seeking any item they can trade for a little cash now and then, but they are very selective about which outsiders they tell about these sites. I felt privileged once again to be standing there looking at the remains of pyramids, and a very extensive ancient wall encircling the grounds. I was anxious to see the 'monkey head', so we pressed on.

I was astonished at what they showed me. I could see why they thought it a 'monkey head', for there were eyes and a small mouth and tiny nose slits. But it appeared more like the contemporary image of an extraterrestrial, as the photo demonstrates. Even more interesting, the eyes were spirals, which I immediately recognized as identical to sun glyphs of other ancient cultures, specifically those across the Atlantic Ocean. Was I actually looking at evidence of a visitation from an ancient European or Mediterranean culture countless centuries ago? When I noticed the large 'ladder' of X carvings, similar to ancient Northern European writing, I was becoming more convinced. This was the most impressive artifact I had yet seen in my two years of exploration here in Central America.

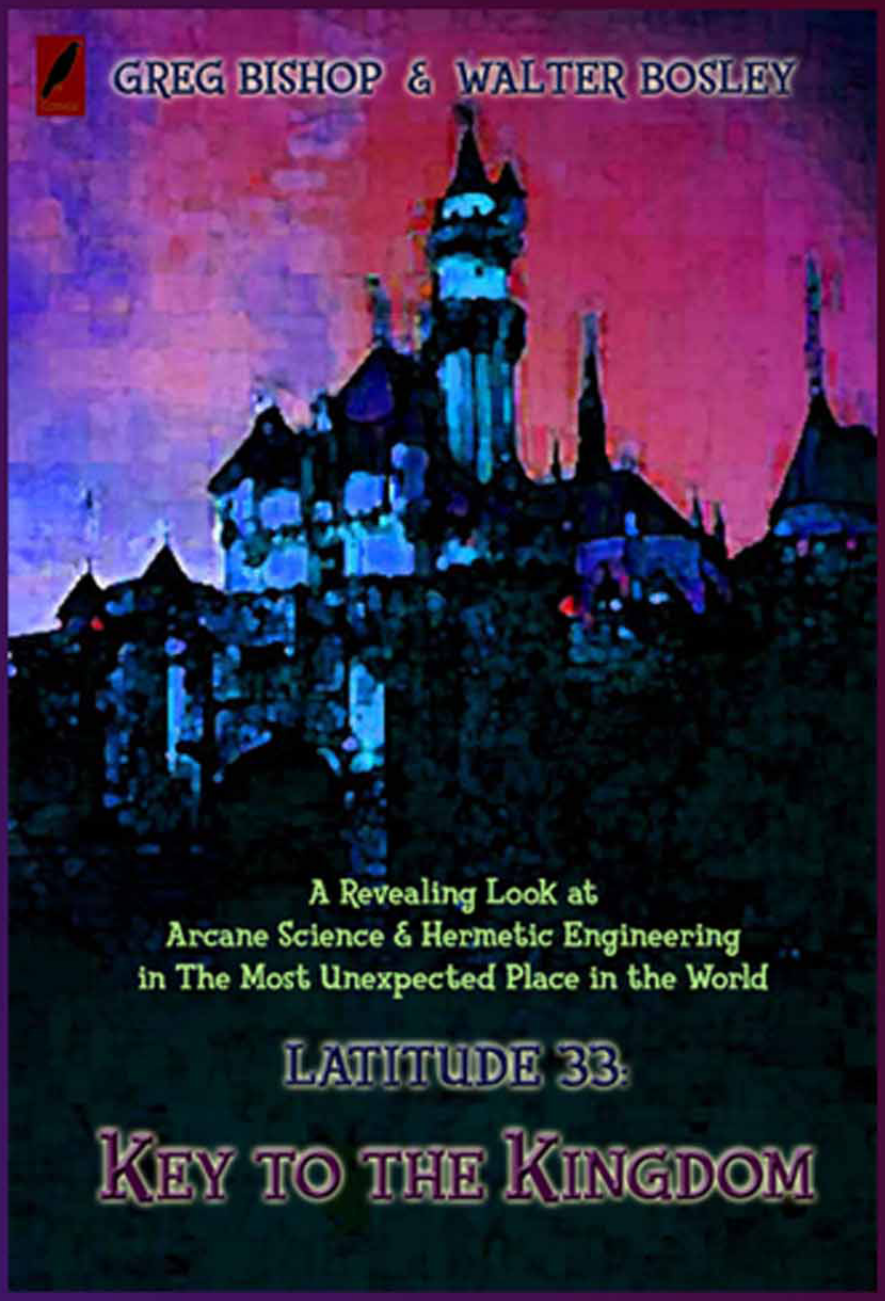
We made it back to our lodging safely. I reviewed the photos of the big boulder with the curiously indicative carvings and I knew I had to return and probe deeper into this lost metropolis. Until then, I had much research to do.







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DRAGON PROWS

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Dragon Prows in the mists are calling
Out where the dream of evening's falling;
Beyond the dim rim of the world
Forgotten standards are unfurled.

Dead men ride the waves at night,
White-maned coursers in restless flight
Beneath them pitch and ever-roll
To carry the unshipped viking-souls.

Love of Thor which saw them bright
Left them to dark Odin's blight
To ever-sail the blood-drenched seas
And sip the deep brine to its lees.

Nets of Ran which cling and hold
Woven of currents swift and cold,
Draw them on their icy course
And fill their spirits with dark remorse;

For when the day again has gone
Apparitions ride the foam,
Doomed to pass upon their way
Until the seas have dried to clay.





UNSUNG

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In silence I slew the shadow-lord beneath a leaden sky,
In a barren land of lichened stone, in victory, I died;
But I sent the essence of the Thing back to the black abyss
No more to pray on humankind's souls and innocence.

With a blade steeped in the lethal juice of the scarlet pulpher-tree
I slew the demon from the murk which borders Reality;
But I received a cosmic blast which burst my soul and brain
And so I died, an unsung hero, for no man knew my name.

My sword has long since melted away into a smear of rust
And the lives and love I fought to save have long been turned to dust.
But when the planets make the shape that opens Darkness' Door
I'll rise anew, take up my blade, and go to die once more.

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HORIZON

As you have seen, we just keep fine tuning and improving things around here with each issue. I am most pleased with acheiving a distinct identity for this magazine -- at least I hope we have.

Many people have asked about the printed version and we are preparing it as I write this. It will be the fulfillment of my company's original vision to hold a printed edition in my hands. I am encouraged by the enthusisastic request for it and will deliver soon.

Naturally, I'm already thinking of the next issue, as I hope you are, too. You can look forward to our regular features along with a couple of new articles, and always new fiction. Next issue, we are delighted to continue the adventures of Julius Corbin in E. A. Guest's 'Tropic of Despair', a dark gothic novel based upon some works of and 'co-authored' with F Marion Crawford, a Victorian era author of ghost stories. This novel marked Guest's journey into a more literary territory of pulp adventure-horror fiction. Believe me, it's definitely pulpier than the first! We'll have more of the visceral verse of W Michael Mott and who knows what else?

See you next issue!

Marianna Vaha

International Speaker and Author

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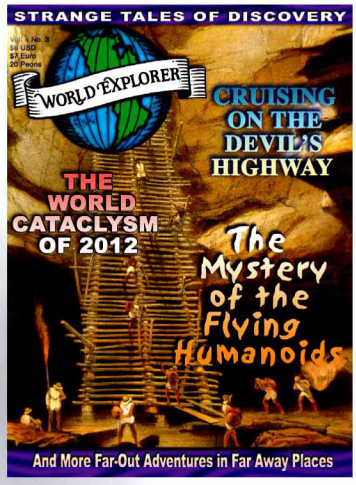
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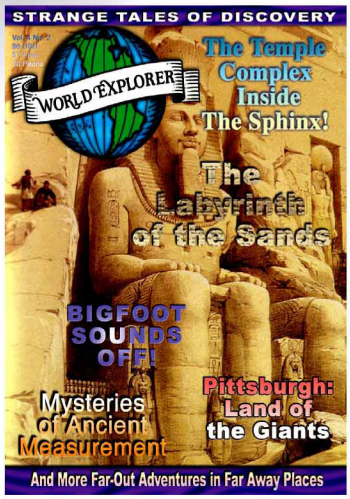
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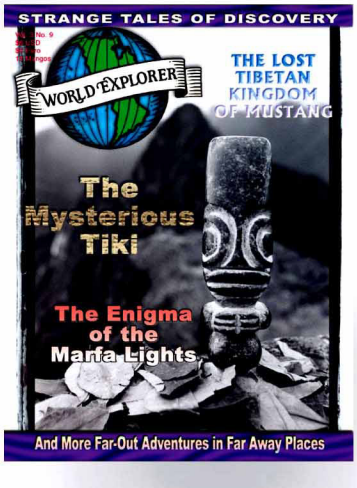


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